Russia’s War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects

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Russia’s renewed invasion of neighboring Ukraine in February 2022 marked the start of Europe’s deadliest armed conflict in decades. After a steady buildup of military forces along Ukraine’s borders since 2021, Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, with Russian ground forces attacking from multiple directions.

Initially, Russian forces made gains along all lines of advance. However, Russian forces ran into effective and likely unexpected levels of Ukrainian resistance from the invasion’s outset. In addition, many analysts and officials assess that during this first stage of the war the Russian military performed poorly overall and was hindered by specific tactical choices, poor logistics, ineffective communications, and command-and-control issues. The Ukrainian military, while at a quantitative and qualitative disadvantage in personnel, equipment, and resources, has proven more resilient and adaptive than Russia expected.

Over the course of the first several weeks of the war, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military had to adjust to various setbacks and other developments on the ground. With many of its advances stalled, in late March 2022, Russian defense officials announced that Russian military operations would focus on eastern Ukraine, including the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (collectively known as the Donbas, where Russian-led separatists have been fighting since 2014) and that Russia would withdraw its forces around Kyiv and Chernihiv in the north.

Since refocusing on the Donbas region of Ukraine, Russia has gained territory in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. President Putin recalibrated his stated war aims to emphasize helping “the people in the Donbas, who feel their unbreakable bond with Russia.” It is unclear whether Russia has the necessary forces to achieve its recalibrated objectives, considering losses of personnel and equipment. However, short-term strategies to increase recruitment are unlikely to resolve personnel challenges and likely will undermine Russian capability going forward.

As Russia suffers from a lack of personnel and supply challenges, momentum may be shifting to Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) counterattacks. The UAF continues to train and deploy personnel to exploit Russian weaknesses, including the use of advanced Western systems to target key Russian logistics, infrastructure, and command centers. How the UAF decides to deploy limited resources and personnel likely will play a crucial role in the conflict’s evolution.

After unprecedented Ukrainian success retaking territory in Ukraine’s northeastern region of Kharkiv in September 2022, many observers believe momentum has swung in Ukraine’s favor for the immediate future. The UAF has demonstrated an ability to deploy forces effectively to conduct offensive operations, and the Russian military continues to suffer from endemic and structural failings. Recent Russian losses in personnel, equipment, and morale likely will limit its operational capability for the immediate future.

Congress is poised to continue to track these developments closely, especially as it considers U.S. and international efforts to support Ukraine militarily and respond to events on the ground. For more, see CRS Report R47054, Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: Related CRS Products.
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Introduction

Russia’s renewed invasion of neighboring Ukraine in February 2022 marked the start of Europe’s deadliest armed conflict in decades. It also prompted intensive international efforts to respond to the war. Multiple Members of Congress have engaged with U.S. and international measures, including by supporting sanctions against Russia, providing assistance to Ukraine, and bolstering support to neighboring NATO countries. The immediate and long-term implications of the war are likely to be far-reaching, affecting numerous policy dimensions of concern to Congress.

This report addresses Russian and Ukrainian military and intelligence aspects of the war, which are of interest to many in Congress as Congress considers various legislative measures and conducts oversight of U.S. policy. It provides an overview of the conflict, including the run-up to the invasion, the performance and conduct of the Russian and Ukrainian militaries, possible Russian intentions, and recent developments on the ground. For other CRS products related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including U.S. policy dimensions, see CRS Report R47054, Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: Related CRS Products.

Prelude to Invasion: Military Buildup and Force Posture

In mid-October 2021, social media and news outlets began to report significant movement by Russian military forces, with limited Russian transparency, on or near the Ukrainian border and within Ukraine’s occupied Crimea region. The buildup came after a sustained increase in Russia’s permanent force posture on the Ukrainian border. Since 2014, Russia has created two new Combined Arms Armies (CAAs), one in the Western Military District (20th CAA, headquartered in Voronezh) and one in the Southern Military District (8th CAA, headquartered in Rostov-on-Don and Novocherkassk) bordering Ukraine. Russia created these CAAs to oversee, coordinate, and manage command and control of units transported to the border. The 8th CAA also reportedly commands the separatist units in two Russia-controlled areas in eastern Ukraine (the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, or DNR/LNR).

Throughout December 2021, Russia continued to build up its forces in the region. Prior to the February 2022 invasion, Russia had mobilized between 150,000 and 190,000 personnel and 120 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) on its border with Ukraine, in Belarus, and in Ukraine’s occupied Crimea region, according to U.S. government estimates.3

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1 Michael Kofman, “Putin’s Wager in Russia’s Standoff with the West,” War on the Rocks, January 24, 2022.
2 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) are ad hoc, task-specific formations designed to operate autonomously as combined arms formations. BTGs are built around infantry and armor units, with supporting air defense, artillery, and other units. BTGs comprise the higher readiness units of the Russian military and are staffed by professional (also known as contract) personnel. Each Russian regiment or brigade is intended to generate two BTGs. In August 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated the Russian military had 168 BTGs. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces (Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), pp. 34–40; Tass, “Russian Army Operates Around 170 Battalion Tactical Groups—Defense Chief,” August 20, 2021; Sebastien Roblin, “Russian Battalion Groups Are Assembling Around Ukraine: What Is Putin Up To?” 19FortyFive, December 17, 2021; Conflict Intelligence Team, “Almost All Contract Soldiers Are Going to the Border: Comments on Social Media Shed Light on Russian Troop Transfer,” January 19, 2022.
During this buildup, analysts and observers documented the movement of Russian units from across Russia toward Ukraine. The 41st and 2nd CAAs moved from the Central Military District into Belarus and to Ukraine’s northeast border with Russia; the 1st Guards Tank Army and the 6th CAA moved from the Western Military District to Ukraine’s eastern border with Russia; the 49th and 58th CAAs moved from the Southern Military District to occupied Crimea and to Ukraine’s southeast border with Russia; and the 35th and 36th CAAs (and elements of the 29th and 5th CAAs) moved from the Eastern Military District to Belarus. In addition, Russia deployed elite units—such as Russian Airborne (VDV), Naval Infantry, and spetsnaz (elite light infantry units used for reconnaissance and direct action)—around Ukraine’s borders.

These forces included the full range of Russian military capabilities, including artillery and support systems. The ground forces included air defense, artillery and rocket artillery, long-range precision missile systems (Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile [SRBM] systems), electronic warfare, support, and logistics units. Additionally, by February 2022, Russia had mobilized large numbers of Aerospace Forces (VKS) fighter, fighter-bomber, and helicopter squadrons, which some observers believed would play a key role in the initial invasion.

On February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would recognize the independence of the DNR and LNR. Russian recognition appeared to include the entire regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (collectively known as the Donbas), most of which had remained under Ukrainian control since Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and not just territory controlled by DNR/LNR.

Shortly after February 21, Putin announced Russia would send “peacekeepers” into the DNR/LNR, claiming they were to defend against Ukrainian plans for invasion and sabotage attempts. These Russian charges had no basis in fact. Despite denials from Russian officials, Russia had spent months amassing a significant portion of its military capabilities around Ukraine.

On February 24—following months of warning and concern from the Biden Administration, European allies, NATO, and some Members of Congress—Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia claimed its invasion was to conduct a “special military operation” to protect the civilian

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For more on the Russian military buildup, see CRS Insight IN11806, Russian Military Buildup Along the Ukrainian Border, by Andrew S. Bowen.

Units from all 11 Combined Arms Armies (CAAs) and one Tank Army (as well as the 14th and 22nd Army Corps) were present on the borders of Ukraine in the run-up to the invasion. For more, see Konrad Muzyka, “Tracking Russian Deployments near Ukraine—Autumn-Winter 2021-22,” Rochan Consulting, November 15, 2021; Dmitry Gorenburg and Michael Kofman, “Here’s What We Know About Russia’s Military Buildup near Ukraine,” Washington Post, January 15, 2022.

VDV include elite paratroop and air assault forces. VDV act as Russia’s elite rapid response forces. For more on Russian military capabilities and structure see CRS In Focus IF11589, Russian Armed Forces: Capabilities, by Andrew S. Bowen; Christian Haimet, “Russian Troop Buildup Continues on Ukrainian Borders,” Jane’s IHS, February 21, 2022.


population and to “demilitarize” and “de-Nazify” Ukraine; many observers understood the latter term as a false pretext for overthrowing the democratically elected Ukrainian government.\(^{11}\)

**Figure 1. Ukraine**

![Figure 1. Ukraine](image)

**Source:** Congressional Research Service.

### Initial Invasion

On February 24, 2022, hours after Putin’s televised address announcing a “special military operation,” Russia invaded Ukraine with an air and missile attack, using precision-guided munitions (PGMs) against key targets. These early targets included logistics centers, naval installations, command and control centers, air defenses, and critical infrastructure.\(^{12}\) In the opening stages of the attack, the Pentagon assessed that Russia launched over 100 SRBMs, including Iskander-M SRBMs, and air- and sea-launched cruise missiles.\(^{13}\)

Some observers believe Russia’s initial strategy was (or was intended) to achieve air superiority, degrade Ukrainian air defenses, and undermine the Ukrainian military’s ability to coordinate defenses and counterattacks. This initial bombardment, however, was more limited in duration.

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and scale than some analysts expected.\textsuperscript{14} In particular, analysts noted that the Russian air forces (VKS) failed to conduct effective suppression of enemy air defense missions, either because of an unwillingness to act or because of a lack of capability. Russia’s failure to degrade the Ukrainian air force and air defenses, as well as Ukrainian command and control capabilities, allowed the Ukrainian military to respond more successfully to Russia’s invasion than most observers expected, both at the outset and subsequently.\textsuperscript{15}

After the air assault, Russian ground forces attacked from multiple directions: north from occupied Crimea in the direction of Kherson; limited incursions west from DNR/LNR, from Russia’s Belgorod and Kursk toward Ukraine’s cities of Kharkiv and Sumy; and a strong two-pronged thrust toward the capital of Kyiv from Belarus.\textsuperscript{16} The first phase of the war was subsequently defined by rapid maneuver operations to outflank and seize key objectives.

Kyiv was an initial key Russian military target.\textsuperscript{17} Led by elite, but comparatively lightly equipped, VDV, \textit{spetsnaz}, and reconnaissance units, Russian forces advanced along the western side of Kyiv and reached the outskirts of the city within days.\textsuperscript{18} In the early hours of the invasion, Russian VDV units conducted a risky air assault to seize the Antonov International Airport in Hostomel, on the outskirts of Kyiv.\textsuperscript{19} Analysts have argued that the Russian attack to seize the airport was intended to allow the rapid introduction of follow-on VDV units to surround and seize the Ukrainian capital.\textsuperscript{20} Ukrainian forces, however, responded and repulsed the attack, reportedly causing heavy Russian casualties and shooting down several helicopters.\textsuperscript{21}

Initially, Russian forces made gains along all lines of advance.\textsuperscript{22} Russia made the most progress in the south from occupied Crimea, reportedly imposing significant casualties on Ukrainian forces in the region. Russian forces advanced quickly toward Kherson (which they captured on March 2, 2022) and eventually turned toward the Ukrainian coastal city of Mariupol.\textsuperscript{23} Analysts argue that Russian advances in the south were successful in part because they involved some of Russia’s most modern and professional units from the Southern Military District and had better logistical

\textsuperscript{14} Michael Kofman and Jeffrey Edmonds, “Russia’s Shock and Awe: Moscow’s Use of Overwhelming Force Against Ukraine,” \textit{Foreign Affairs}, February 22, 2022.

\textsuperscript{15} Some analysts speculate that this result was due to Ukraine’s decision, possibly influenced by U.S. and Western intelligence, to activate and disperse most of its units from their permanent bases in preparation for a possible Russian invasion. Warren P. Strobel and Michael R. Gordon, “Biden Administration Altered Rules for Sharing Intelligence with Ukraine,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, March 8, 2022.


\textsuperscript{22} CRS Insight IN11872, \textit{Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Issues and Aspects}, by Andrew S. Bowen.

support than other units, due to rail access from Crimea. In other regions, Russia made slow but initially steady progress, seeking to encircle rather than capture major urban centers such as Sumy, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv. Logistics issues and other factors soon stalled most Russian advances.

Russian forces ran into effective Ukrainian resistance from the invasion’s outset. Despite not announcing a general mobilization until February 25, after the invasion began, the Ukrainian military immediately hindered, deflected, and imposed costs on Russian forces in personnel and equipment. The Ukrainian military appeared to exploit numerous tactical and operational deficiencies of Russian forces (which were overextended in many cases), allowing the Ukrainian military to conduct ambushes and counterattacks.

Russian units operated with little tactical sophistication and not as combined arms formations, leaving units exposed and unprepared for Ukrainian resistance, according to observers and analysts. Overall, training and professionalism of Russian units appeared much lower than expected, even among supposedly “elite” units. For example, elite but relatively lightly equipped units (such as VDV, spetsnaz, and reconnaissance units) conducted operations they were not trained or equipped to conduct, such as advancing into urban areas, where they appeared to suffer heavy casualties due to the lack of heavy armored support.

Additionally, armored units advanced without infantry support in numerous instances. In another example, Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya) units reportedly advanced alongside, and sometimes in front of, Russian military forces, apparently with little coordination.

Contributing to the confusion, observers documented Russian units operating without encrypted communications, often using civilian equipment to communicate.

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29 Observers noted these units suffered particularly high casualties, which undermined Russian military effectiveness due to their perceived high professionalism and ratio of contract/professional servicemen. James Beardsworth and Irina Shcherbakova, “Are There Even Any Left? 100 Days of War in Ukraine for an Elite Russian Unit,” Moscow Times, June 4, 2022.


31 Rosgvardiya units are key internal security troops, neither equipped nor trained for conventional combat and likely sent into Ukraine early in the invasion to prevent protests against any new pro-Russian Ukrainian leadership. See CRS In Focus IF11647, Russian Law Enforcement and Internal Security Agencies, by Andrew S. Bowen; Vladimir Sevinovskiy, “Refusing to Kill People Isn’t a Crime: The Russian National Guard Is Firing Officers Who Refuse to Join the War in Ukraine,” Meduza, March 29, 2022; Tim Ripley, “Russian National Guard Deployed Across Ukraine,” Jane’s IHS, April 4, 2022.

Despite having significant artillery, rocket artillery, and air capabilities, Russian forces appeared restrained in their use of these systems and capabilities during the initial invasion. Some analysts speculated this occurred because the Russian military underestimated the level of Ukrainian resistance and that it may have indicated an initial hesitation to inflict collateral damage on civilian targets that would be crucial for supporting a Russian occupation.

Analysis of Russia and Ukraine’s Initial Military Performance

Russian Performance

Despite Russian forces launching heavy attacks and advancing across Ukraine, the Russian military overall performed poorly during the initial phases of the invasion, surprising most observers and analysts (including Ukrainian military and political officials). Reports indicated that Russia’s military and political leadership appeared surprised by the military’s lack of progress and the level of resistance from Ukrainian forces. Some Russian forces invaded with apparently little preparation. Captured Russian soldiers and intercepted communications revealed that many units were unaware they were to invade Ukraine until shortly beforehand. As Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated to Congress in early March 2022, “We assess Moscow underestimated the strength of Ukraine’s resistance and the degree of internal military challenges we are observing, which include an ill-constructed plan, morale issues and considerable logistical issues.”

In particular, many analysts were surprised at the apparently limited role the VKS played at the outset of the invasion, beyond the initial bombardment. Russian ground forces appeared to have limited air cover, with Russia primarily relying on Iskander-M SRBMs or air-launched cruise missiles launched from VKS bombers inside Belarus and Russia, especially to target Ukrainian infrastructure and other targets in western Ukraine (see Figure 2). The Ukrainian air force...
continued to operate over western Ukraine, and its air defenses shot down Russian aircraft and challenged Russian air superiority.\(^{41}\)

**Figure 2. Ukraine Airfields and Key Infrastructure**

The Russian military’s logistics issues limited its offensives in almost all sectors.\(^{42}\) Russian units appeared poorly supplied (for example, some captured Russian food reportedly was expired and inedible) and seemed to advance past available logistics support.\(^{43}\) Available logistics appeared too limited to sustain multiple simultaneous offensives.\(^{44}\) Moreover, the Ukrainian military appeared to prioritize ambushing Russian supply columns, exacerbating Russian logistics issues.\(^{45}\)

In addition, the Russian military appears to have challenges with command and control, both at the tactical and the operational levels. First, reports indicate there was no overall Russian

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operational commander. As a result, it appears each CAA and axis of advance was operating independently, with questionable levels of coordination.

Second, Russian commanders appeared unprepared for many aspects of the invasion, as evidenced by a lack of coordination among branches (such as VKS and Rosgvardiya) and between units. Reporting indicates that communication problems compounded these command and control issues, contributing to higher-ranking officers moving closer to the frontlines and contributing to casualties among these officers.

Ukrainian Performance

Many observers and analysts have been surprised and impressed by Ukraine’s military resistance. Despite having a smaller military than Russia, and a quantitative and qualitative disadvantage in equipment and resources, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) have proven resilient and adaptive. The UAF has demonstrated greater flexibility than the Russian military and a willingness to adapt to changing conditions to exploit Russian missteps and weaknesses. The UAF also has benefited from high levels of motivation and recruitment, as well as significant Western security assistance and training.

Initially, the UAF traded space to draw Russian forces in, as Russian units advanced without sufficient convoy protection and logistical support. As Russian units advanced, Ukraine emphasized guerrilla strategies, such as hit and run or ambushes, to attack supply lines. Ukraine also isolated Russian units in an effort to tire and deplete Russian forces. Ukraine leveraged key capabilities (such as the TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicle for strikes and targeting), security assistance, and artillery to stymie Russian advances and undermine Russian advantages, such as


47 Reportedly, each CAA brought and set up its own headquarters structure rather than integrating under the command of the Western or Southern Military Districts, as most analysts expected. Tim Ripley, “Russian Military Adapts Command and Control for Ukraine Operations,” Jane’s IHS, March 7, 2022.


49 Compared with Western militaries, Russian commanders have smaller staffs to assist command and generally are closer to the frontlines, which makes casualties among Russian officers more likely. Many analysts, however, have been surprised by the number and ranks of officers killed. The high number likely indicates that problems forced Russian commanders to accept greater levels of exposure. Jack Detsch, “‘Winging It’: Russia Is Getting Its Generals Killed on the Front Lines,” Foreign Policy, March 21, 2022; Alex Horton and Shane Harris, “Russian Troops’ Tendency to Talk on Unsecured Lines Is Proving Costly,” Washington Post, March 27, 2022.

50 CRS In Focus IF11862, Ukrainian Armed Forces, by Andrew S. Bowen; CRS In Focus IF12150, Ukrainian Military Performance and Outlook, by Andrew S. Bowen.


52 Brett Forrest and Alan Cullison, “How Ukraine Blunted the Russian Advance,” Wall Street Journal, March 6, 2022; CRS In Focus IF12040, U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine, by Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt. In addition to the significant levels of security assistance, Western training for the Ukrainian military, specifically Ukrainian special operations forces, has played a key role in defending against Russia’s invasion. For more, see Andrew White, “Ukraine Conflict: Ukrainian Special Operations Forces in Focus,” Jane’s IHS, March 4, 2022.

Possible Russian Intentions and Expectations

Observers continue to speculate about Russia’s initial objectives and plans in launching its offensive against Ukraine. Many analysts believe Russia’s expectations were based on faulty assumptions that undermined Russia’s conduct of the invasion. If this is the case, these incorrect political assumptions possibly determined and imposed unrealistic objectives and timetables onto the Russian military. This in turn may partially, but not entirely, explain the Russian military’s unpreparedness and poor performance.

On February 25, 2022, the Pentagon assessed that Russia had committed one-third of its available troops into Ukraine. U.S. officials and some analysts believe Russia’s initial operation was to “decapitate” the Ukrainian government and rely on fast-moving, elite units to quickly seize key junctures, similar to Russia’s seizure of Ukraine’s Crimea region in 2014. Some analysts speculate that Russia may have based such a strategy on assumptions that the Ukrainian military would be ineffective and the Ukrainian political leadership could be easily replaced. As Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Burns testified before the House Intelligence Committee in March 2022, Putin “was confident that he had modernized his military and they were capable of a quick, decisive victory at minimal cost. He’s been proven wrong on every count. Those assumptions have proven to be profoundly flawed over the last 12 days of conflict.”

Analysts speculate that Putin and other Russian policymakers may have held these faulty assumptions in part due to poor intelligence and a willingness by subordinates to convey only positive information to Russian decisionmakers. Recent media reporting indicates the FSB

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overstated its influence and agent networks inside Ukraine, possibly contributing to a false expectation of a quick regime change. Additionally, many observers speculate a relatively small circle of advisers may have outsized influence on Putin and may have contributed to potentially unrealistic assumptions. Observers believe this circle includes Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, who may have overstated the Russian military’s capabilities.

March-May 2022

Since early March 2022, Russian forces attempted to adapt to the reality of effective Ukrainian resistance. Russia made some changes to its military operations, including more coordination between units and a greater attempt to operate as combined arms formations, increased air support, and significantly higher levels of artillery and rocket artillery fire. Russian forces made slow incremental advances but continued to suffer heavy losses in both personnel and equipment. By March 7, 2022, U.S. officials believed Russia had committed “nearly 100 percent” of its available forces into Ukraine. The Russian VKS increased its number of sorties and operations, although most missions appeared to employ unguided weaponry rather than PGMs. The increased sortie rate also meant heavier losses for the VKS, including some of its most advanced helicopter, fighter, and fighter-bombers.

At this stage of the conflict, instead of concentrating on one area of operations, the Russian military appeared to continue multiple lines of advance. In the north, Russian forces attempted to break through Ukrainian defenses around Kyiv, from both the northwest and the east. In the east, Russian forces surrounded Kharkiv and attacked toward Izyum. In the south, Russian forces conducted an offensive to seize Mykolaiv in the southwest and Mariupol in the southeast. Each

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70 For specific tracking of the conflict, see Konrad Muzyka, “Ukraine Conflict Monitor,” Rochan Consulting.

advance appeared to compete against the others for increasingly limited reinforcements, logistics, and air support. Gradually, most Russian offensives began to stall due to a number of factors, including continued logistics issues, mounting casualties and a lack of available reinforcements, and increasing Ukrainian counterattacks.\(^72\)

Throughout mid-March 2022, the Ukrainian military conducted effective counterattacks across most axes of advance, defeating repeated Russian offensives outside of Kyiv, outside of Kharkiv and Sumy, and in Mykolaiv.\(^73\) Ukraine also attacked captured infrastructure, such as an airbase in Kherson and the port of Berdyansk, and destroyed key Russian assets.\(^74\)

Toward the end of March 2022, Russian offensives around Kyiv stalled. Ukrainian forces launched multiple sustained counteroffensives and pushed back Russian forces.\(^75\) Observers noted that, after failing to achieve a decisive victory quickly, Russia was reevaluating its objectives and strategy toward achieving territorial gains in the south and east of Ukraine.\(^76\) On March 25, the Russian Ministry of Defense held a press conference alleging that Russia had mostly met its initial objectives and would move on to the second phase of the operation, focusing on eastern Ukraine, including the Donbas.\(^77\) Russia soon announced it was withdrawing forces from around Kyiv and Chernihiv; analysts speculated that this was aimed at allowing the redeployment of units for further offensives in the east.\(^78\) U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan stated on April 4, 2022, “Russia is repositioning its forces to concentrate its offensive operations in eastern and parts of southern Ukraine.... All indications are that Russia will seek to surround and overwhelm Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine.”\(^79\)

Subsequently, Russia redirected forces to support operations in the east to cut off Ukrainian military units in the Donbas.\(^80\) On April 12, President Putin stated that Russia’s “military


\(^74\) Most analysts believe Ukraine launched Tochka-U short-range ballistic missile systems during the attacks on Kherson Airbase and the port of Berdyansk. Analysts cite this occurrence as another failure of the VKS to target and destroy such key strategic weapon systems. Joseph Trevithick and Tyler Rogoway, “Barrage Leaves Russian-Occupied Kherson Airbase in Flames,” The Drive, March 15, 2022; Andrew Carey et al., “Ukrainians Claim to Have Destroyed Large Russian Warship in Berdyansk,” CNN, March 25, 2022.


\(^80\) The Joint Forces Operation (JFO) is Ukraine’s term for its military operation against the Russian-controlled Donets and Luhansk People’s Republics. Most analysts consider Ukrainian military forces in the JFO to be Ukraine’s best units. Barbara Sturr et al., “Russia Shifting Focus to Show a Victory by Early May in Eastern Ukraine, U.S. Officials
operation will continue until its full completion” but said, “Our goal is to help the people in the Donbas, who feel their unbreakable bond with Russia.” The terrain in the Donbas favored Russian forces, with its advantages in artillery units, and made it more difficult for Ukrainian forces to conduct guerrilla-style attacks.

Despite the apparent focus on the Donbas, some observers remained concerned about larger Russian objectives. On April 22, 2022, Major General Rustam Minnekayev, the deputy commander of the Central Military District, said in an interview that Russia wanted to take full control of eastern and southern Ukraine, including a possible land bridge to Transnistria, a Russia-supported breakaway territory in Moldova. Many observers believe this statement reflects larger Russian political objectives over the medium to long term, since Russian military force constraints prevent a serious offensive to capture Odessa and link up with Transnistria.

**Sinkings of the Moskva and Snake Island**

On April 13, 2022, the flagship of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, the Slava class missile cruiser Moskva, reportedly was struck by two Ukrainian R-360 Neptune anti-ship missiles. Initially, Russia denied the Moskva was hit by missiles, said it sunk in a storm after an accidental fire, and attempted to tow the heavily damaged cruiser back to port in Sevastopol; the damage was catastrophic, however, and the ship eventually sank. Reports indicate the Moskva was blocking Odessa and providing air defense support to Russian units in the southwest near Kherson when it was struck. The sinking provided a morale boost to Ukrainian forces and undermined Russian efforts to threaten an amphibious assault against Odessa, potentially freeing up Ukrainian forces defending the city to conduct counteroffensives against Russian forces near Kherson. Russia’s new flagship of the Black Sea Fleet is the Project 11356 frigate Admiral Makarov.

The sinking of the Moskva also threatened Russia’s control over Snake Island, a small rock outcropping in the Black Sea seized during the initial days of the invasion and used to support the Russian blockade of Odessa. Ukrainian forces harassed Russian forces on the island throughout the conflict using TB2 UCAVs and fighters, sinking Russian ships and destroying air defense systems. Eventually, long-range Ukrainian artillery and the loss of the Moskva made the island untenable, and Russian forces departed Snake Island by the end of June.

**Sources:**


On April 18, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Russia had begun its offensive in the Donbas after a barrage of Russian missile strikes across Ukraine. Russian forces initially conducted slow and gradual probing attacks against Ukrainian forces, including the use of heavy artillery and rocket artillery to support operations. Russia concentrated on pressing Ukrainian

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85 Ivana Saric, “Russia Seizes Eastern Ukraine City of Kreminna, Official Says,” Axtos, April 19, 2022; Christopher
forces south of Izyum, west from Severodonetsk toward Kramatorsk and Slovyansk, and from Donetsk to create a large encirclement of UAF.\footnote{Miller and Paul McLeary, “Heavy Weaponry Pours into Ukraine as Commanders Become More Desperate,” \textit{Politico}, April 25, 2022; Konrad Muzyka, “Ukraine Conflict Monitor: April 24, 2022,” Rochan Consulting, April 25, 2022.}

Russian forces ran into determined and effective UAF resistance and were unable to make significant progress.\footnote{Konrad Muzyka, “Ukraine Conflict Monitor: April 24, 2022,” Rochan Consulting, April 25, 2022; Author correspondence with Michael Kofman.} Russian forces could not break through Ukrainian defenses around Izyum, partially resulting from too few units and a gradual deployment, even with reinforcements from the abandoned effort to take Kyiv.\footnote{Zachary Cohenet et al., “Russia Making ‘Slow and Uneven’ Progress as Military Tries to Fix Problems That Plagued Early Invasion, U.S. Officials Say,” CNN, April 28, 2022; Sam Jones et al., “‘Anemic’ Russian Advance Heralds Long War of Attrition,” \textit{Financial Times}, May 5, 2022.} Additionally, UAF forces reinforced and conducted counterattacks outside of Kharkiv, pushing Russian forces in some positions back toward the border and potentially placing the Russian city of Belgorod within striking distance of long-range Ukrainian rocket and missile artillery.\footnote{Konrad Muzyka, “Ukraine Conflict Monitor: 9-15 May 2022,” Rochan Consulting, May 15, 2022. Some estimated 20-25 Russian BTGs in the Izyum area, but those forces were never fully deployed together and some were held in reserve. Additionally, some units were reported to rotate back to Russia after suffering heavy losses and becoming combat ineffective.} Throughout the war, numerous unexplained explosions have occurred at various industrial sites in Russia, some of which are likely the result of Ukrainian air, missile, or sabotage attacks.\footnote{Mike Eckel, “Blasts, Bombs, and Drones: Amid Carnage in Ukraine, A Shadow War on the Russian Side of the Border,” \textit{RFE/RL}, April 29, 2022.} UAF forces also conducted counterattacks toward Izyum, reportedly advancing against Russian units (such as those from the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army), which had suffered significant casualties.\footnote{Mike Eckel, “Fizzled Faltering? ‘Anemic’? Why Russia’s Donbas Offensive Isn’t Going Exactly as Anticipated,” \textit{RFE/RL}, May 3, 2022.}

Russia’s redeployment of forces away from Kyiv and toward eastern Ukraine indicated the Russian military’s need to rest and resupply after using most of its combat-effective units. During this time, analysts noted the need for Russian personnel reinforcements, not only to replace losses but also to support further Russian offensives.\footnote{Department of Defense, “Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing,” press release, April 8, 2022; \textit{Economist}, “Rob Lee on Why Attrition Will Be a Critical Factor in the Battle for the Donbas,” April 23, 2022.} Conditions forced Russia to pull units from foreign bases to help replace and rotate out units.\footnote{Reports indicate Russia was forced to deploy units from several foreign bases, including units from the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, \textit{7th} Military Base in Russia-occupied Abkhazia (Georgia), and \textit{4th} Military Base in Russia-occupied South Ossetia (Georgia), to support operations in Ukraine. Digital Forensics Research Lab, “Additional Units from Georgian Breakaway Regions Join Russian Offensive,” Atlantic Council, March 28, 2022.} Russia reportedly also has deployed private military companies (including heavy use of Wagner Private Military Company) to support operations, primarily to oversee and support Russian-led forces from the DNR/LNR.\footnote{\textit{Economist}, “Russia’s Brutal Mercenaries Probably Won’t Matter Much in Ukraine,” April 9, 2022; Miriam Berger, “What Is the Wagner Group, the Russian Mercenary Entity in Ukraine?,” \textit{Washington Post}, April 9, 2022.} Many observers speculated that Putin would announce a state of war and national mobilization during Russia’s May 9 Victory Day celebration, allowing Russia to call up reserves and use conscripts in combat.\footnote{Robyn Dixon and Liz Sly, “On a Victory Day Without Victory, Putin Faces Choice over All-Out War,” \textit{Washington Post}, May 7, 2022; Dmitry Alperovitch and Michael Kofman, “War in Ukraine,” \textit{Silverado Policy Accelerator}, May 8, 2022.} The celebration passed with no such announcement. Despite the slow pace of Russian

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progress and need for reinforcements, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee on May 20, 2022, “We assess President Putin is preparing for prolonged conflict in Ukraine during which he still intends to achieve goals beyond the Donbas.”

A key Russian military objective was the coastal city of Mariupol, in the Donetsk region. Russian forces gradually surrounded and advanced into Mariupol against stiff Ukrainian resistance. The effort to seize the city benefited from Russia shifting operations away from seizing further territory in the Kherson region (which includes Mykolaiv). After weeks of bombardment and fighting, Ukrainian military forces and large numbers of civilians were isolated in the Azovstal iron and steel plant.

On April 21, Putin announced that Russia had seized Mariupol and that Russian forces would not assault the Azovstal plant but would surround and seal it off, despite Ukrainian forces’ continued resistance. Ukraine announced on May 16 that it had instructed its remaining troops at Azovstal to cease combat missions. Shortly thereafter, Ukrainian troops began surrendering and were evacuated to Russian-controlled areas. The status of these prisoners remains unclear, with potential options ranging from “trials” for Russian propaganda purposes to some form of prisoner exchange. On July 29, a massive explosion ripped through a prisoner-of-war camp housing many of the prisoners from Mariupol, killing an estimated 50 prisoners. Russia alleged the explosion was the result of a Ukrainian missile strike, but many observers believe it was some other cause.

Russia also continued its use of long-range PGMs against targets in western Ukraine, but the VKS did not seek further air superiority beyond eastern Ukraine. Russia conducted long-range PGM strikes against what Russian officials say are the Ukrainian defense industry and infrastructure targets in an attempt to cripple and undermine the Ukrainian military’s long-term capability. However, observers began to note the questionable precision, capability, and quantity...

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105 Matthew Mpoke Bigg and Maria Varenikova, “Here’s What We Know About the Deadly Blast at a Prisoner Camp in Eastern Ukraine,” New York Times, August 1, 2022.

106 Joyce Sohyun Lee et al., “What We Know About the Blast That Killed Ukrainian POWs in Olenivka,” Washington Post, August 6, 2022.
of PGMs still available to Russian forces.¹⁰⁷ U.S. officials have stated most PGMs appear to be air-launched cruise missiles from bombers inside Russia.¹⁰⁸

**May-September 2022**

After the capture of Mariupol, Russia refocused efforts on seizing key urban and infrastructure areas in Donetsk and Luhansk.¹⁰⁹ Due to losses, Russia appeared unable to focus and concentrate combat power on multiple advances, forcing it to refocus efforts on a single objective while consolidating its hold on captured territory (such as in Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia).¹¹⁰ By mid-May 2022, Russia appeared unable to capture the key cities of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, a likely target of Russia’s refocused offensives. Instead, Russia focused on seizing the towns of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, which would give Russia almost total control over Luhansk Oblast.¹¹¹

![Figure 3. Donbas Region of Ukraine](source: Congressional Research Service)

In contrast to the early days of the invasion, the fighting in the Donbas resembled a more traditional conventional conflict of slow but intense fighting, and Russia reverted to its traditional reliance on the massed use of artillery and rocket artillery.¹¹² Russian forces appeared to conduct a pincer movement to cut off Ukrainian forces in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk.¹¹³ In the north, Russian forces pushed southeast from Izyum, capturing Lyman and attempting to make several crossings of the Siverskyi Donets River near Bilohorivka, but came under Ukrainian artillery fire and suffered heavy casualties.¹¹⁴ In the Donbas, Russia relied heavily on Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)

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and local DNR/LNR units. These forces sustained heavy casualties but gradually pushed the UAF back and captured key towns such as Popasna.

The UAF continued to staunchly defend territory instead of conducting an organized withdrawal, leading some analysts to speculate that Ukraine’s strategy was to impose as much attrition on Russian forces as possible. Nevertheless, Russian forces, including Chechen Rosgvardiya and DNR/LNR troops, continued their offensive into Severodonetsk and gradually seized control of the city after Ukraine ordered its forces to retreat to Lysychansk. Russian forces continued to advance north from Popasna toward Bakhmut, threatening to cut off UAF units and envelope Lysychansk. Subsequently, the UAF withdrew from Lysychansk to prepared defensive lines between Bakhmut and Siversk.

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### Reported Russian and Ukrainian Casualties

Estimates of wartime casualties vary widely and may not be considered reliable. Due to the continuing state of war, verifying exact numbers of casualties is nearly impossible. Generally, ranges of possible casualties are given as estimates due to the uncertain and changing nature of assessments. Below are some estimates mentioned in various press reports through August 2022.

#### Russian Casualties

**Russia**: Officially, the Russian government stated in late March 2022 that 1,351 soldiers had died and another 3,850 had been wounded. On March 20, 2022, the pro-Kremlin newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda appeared to publish Russian Ministry of Defense figures that listed 9,861 deaths. This figure remains unconfirmed, and the newspaper deleted the report and stated that it had been hacked. Russia has not provided a casualty update since.

**United States**: U.S estimates of Russian military losses range from 70,000 to 80,000 total (including killed and wounded). In July, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns estimated the Russians suffered 15,000 killed. In early August, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl stated, “I think it’s safe to suggest that the Russians are probably taking 70 or 80,000 casualties in less than six months.”

**United Kingdom**: UK estimates of Russian casualties are slightly higher than those of U.S. officials. UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace in August stated Russia has suffered 80,000 casualties, while citing in June estimates that Russia suffered 25,000 killed.

#### Ukrainian Casualties

Until recently, Ukraine has been reluctant to share casualty figures. In June 2022, Ukrainian officials stated that Ukraine was losing 100-200 soldiers per day during the height of fighting around Severodonetsk. On August 22, 2022, Commander in Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Valerii Zaluzny stated Ukraine had suffered almost 9,000 killed.

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Civilian Casualties

In August 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated 5,587 civilians had been killed and 7,890 wounded since the war began. The commissioner also noted that this was likely an undercount. For example, in Mariupol, a city that suffered especially severe civilian casualties, Ukrainian sources have stated that local morgues have documented at least 87,000 deaths.


The UAF suffered heavy casualties during the fighting for Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, including among experienced veterans who volunteered for the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) and reserve units. The UAF broke up the core of its maneuver formations into smaller units to spearhead localized counterattacks and to shore up TDF and Reserve units manning defensive positions. According to a RUSI study, “In the defense, this has led to reasonable combat performance by these troops. For the attack, however, the Ukrainian armed forces have found it necessary to bring their best units back together and have them spearhead attacks.” Many UAF counteroffensives, such as outside of Kharkiv, slowed as Russian units regrouped and UAF forces concentrated on defending the Ukrainian-controlled areas of the Donbas, leaving TDF units to defend the frontline but unable to launch further offensive action. The UAF also struggled with secure communications and instances of command and control issues between the TDF and regular military, as well as a dire need for artillery and heavy weapon support.

Beginning in mid-May 2022, the UAF began receiving significant shipments of U.S. and Western artillery systems, specifically the U.S. M777 155mm howitzer and ammunition. Security assistance has been critical to sustaining UAF operations and countering the Russian advantage in artillery and rocket artillery, since the UAF reports it is running low on ammunition and parts for its Soviet/Russian artillery systems. Nevertheless, training time and the high need for systems have resulted in most UAF units still relying on older Soviet/Russian systems while waiting for

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121 Dave Lawler, “Ukraine Suffering Up to 1,000 Casualties Per Day in Donbas, Official Says,” Axios, June 15, 2022; Stephen Kalin, “Ukraine’s War of Attrition Exacts Heavy Toll on Both Sides,” Wall Street Journal, June 29, 2022. See also CRS In Focus IF12150, Ukrainian Military Performance and Outlook, by Andrew S. Bowen.

122 Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, “Ukraine at War: Paving the Road From Survival to Victory,” RUSI, July 4, 2022, p. 17


new Western weaponry. By July, Ukraine began receiving U.S.-supplied M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) and M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), providing the UAF with significantly improved targeting ability, including increased range and precision accuracy. Early assessments by U.S. officials and other observers indicate the UAF is using these systems effectively, including to target key Russian command and control, logistics, and transport infrastructure. One significant challenge, however, is maintaining and repairing the vast number of Western systems the UAF has received, all with different standards and requirements for operating.

Over the rest of July, Russian forces attempted to regroup and take an “operational pause” after suffering heavy casualties capturing Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Most observers believed Russia had exhausted most of its forces and required time to refit, resupply, and reorganize. Russian forces did not achieve any significant territorial progress over the next weeks, other than small gains between Siversk and Bakhmut, and appeared to focus on solidifying their control over existing territory. Russia increasingly relied on Wagner PMC and DNR/LNR forces to probe UAF lines and then direct artillery and rocket artillery upon making contact. Open-source reporting continued to document instances of low Russian morale and increasing reports of Russian soldiers refusing to fight, resigning from their contracts before deployment, or refusing orders from their superiors.

**Russian Command and Control Challenges**

Since the start of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, reports indicate Russia has attempted to address its command and control issues, including the lack of an overall operational commander. It is difficult for most observers to definitively identify and state the nature of Russian command and control due to the changing circumstances and operational pause.

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133 It is unclear how widespread and pervasive low morale is in the Russian military, but the rise of such reports, along with the reliance on PMC and DNR/LNR units (including public appeals from DNR/LNR units for support), likely indicates it is not an isolated issue. Because Russia states it is not at war and its invasion is a “Special Military Operation,” contract soldiers can refuse deployment and face only dismissal, not prosecution. This places added pressure on the Russian military’s personnel issues. Timofei Rozhanskiy, “Why Russian Soldiers Are Refusing to Fight in the War on Ukraine,” RFE/RL, July 20, 2022; Pjotr Sauer, “Russian Soldiers Accuse Superiors of Jailing Them for Refusing to Fight,” *Guardian*, August 2, 2022.
lack of transparency. Recent events and reports, however, have provided greater visibility into the general structure and picture of Russian command.

In April 2022, reports emerged that General Alexander Dvornikov, head of the Southern Military District, was given operational command of Russia’s war to help streamline command and control. However, the extent of his direct control and whether he supervised all Russian forces remained unclear. By June, reports emerged that General Dvornikov had been removed from command and replaced by General Gennady Zhidko, the then-head of the Main Military Political Directorate.

As of August, four of five Military District commanders, the head of the Airborne forces (VDV), the commander of the Black Sea Fleet, and multiple junior commanders had been replaced. Russian forces appear to be organized into two “groupings”: the Western and Southern Groupings of Forces. General Sergei Surovikin, commander of the Aerospace Forces, reportedly has taken over command of Russia’s Southern Grouping of Forces from General Zhidko. Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, head of the Central Military District, now commands the Western Grouping of Forces. Overall operation of the war continues to be controlled through the National Defense Management Center in Moscow, which appears to have greater oversight and management of the “groupings” of Russian forces than in the early stages of the invasion.


By early August 2022, as Russian advances stalled, a gradual stalemate and war of attrition began to set in. Russia continued some offensive operations (relying on Russian PMC and LNR/DNR forces) toward Bakhmut and Avdiivka, as well as the town of Pisky, just outside Avdiivka in the Donetsk region.134 The UAF appeared to prepare a shift from defensive to offensive operations. Ukraine began carrying out a series of partisan attacks (including assassinations) against officials in Russia-occupied regions, Russian government infrastructure, and key air bases and supply positions in Crimea.135 These attacks, conducted by Ukrainian Special Forces and local supporters, drones, and missile strikes, have destabilized the Russian military’s control over the region and forced Russia to devote more forces to counterinsurgency and internal security missions.136

International observers remain concerned by the Russian military’s occupation and management of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), the largest nuclear plant in Europe.137 Some

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analysts argue that attacks on nuclear power plants could be considered a “war crime” under international law.\textsuperscript{138} The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) negotiated with Russia and Ukraine to send an expert mission to ZNPP to “assess the physical damage to the ZNPP’s facilities, determine whether the main and back-up safety and security systems were functional and evaluate the staff’s working conditions,” according to the IAEA. An IAEA inspection team visited the plant on September 1; six IAEA inspectors remained on-site for a few days. Two of those inspectors reportedly will stay to continue monitoring the plant’s operation as a permanent presence.\textsuperscript{139}

The UAF began preparations for a counteroffensive by conducting strikes across Kherson and Crimea to degrade Russian capabilities and hinder the resupply of its forces in Kherson, including attacks against key logistics targets and the bridges connecting occupied Kherson with the rest of occupied southern Ukraine.\textsuperscript{140} According to U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley, Ukraine conducted over 400 HIMARS strikes by September 8.\textsuperscript{141} These strikes likely seriously strained Russian logistics and artillery ammunition supply by targeting previously unreachable depots.\textsuperscript{142}

The UAF also deployed high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARM), used to target radar or electronic warfare systems, on its MIG-29 fighters. Russian forces appeared to redeploy from Donetsk and Luhansk to southern Ukraine in preparation for a UAF offensive.\textsuperscript{143} Observers had noted reports of Ukrainian preparation for an offensive for months but speculated whether the UAF had enough trained personnel and sufficient equipment (such as tanks and armored vehicles to rapidly transport infantry) to sustain offensive operations, as well as possible risks of exposing other fronts to counterattack from Russian forces by drawing away resources.\textsuperscript{144} Ukraine likely considered the benefits—including deterring a possible Russian referendum and annexation of occupied territories, considering winter and potential complications due to European reliance on Russian natural gas, and demonstrating to Western allies that continued assistance could shift the


\textsuperscript{139} IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi, press conference, September 2, 2022.


\textsuperscript{141} Reuters, “Ukraine Has Struck More Than 400 Russian Targets with HIMARS - U.S. Top General,” September 8, 2022.

\textsuperscript{142} The Russian military must keep large supplies of ammunition close to the frontlines for resupply due to its heavy reliance on massed artillery fires. These supplies present a particularly vulnerable and significant target. Liz Sly, John Hudson, and David L. Stern, “Crimea Attacks Point to Ukraine’s Newest Strategy, Official Says,” \textit{Washington Post}, August 18, 2022.

\textsuperscript{143} Russia has constructed multiple lines of defense in preparation for a UAF offensive. Including DNR troops, Russia has a significant concentration of VDV and Spetsnaz units (however, as demonstrated in the early stages of the invasion, they are often insufficiently equipped to defend against a large conventional force), as well as various other conventional Russian forces. Isabel Koshiw, “Ukrainian Offensive Forces Russia to Bolster Troops in Occupied South,” \textit{Guardian}, July 31, 2022; Brett Forrest and Bojan Pancevski, “Russia Redeploys Troops in Ukraine as Focus of Conflict Turns South,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, August 1, 2022; and Matthew Luxmoore, “Russia Moves to Reinforce Its Stalled Assault on Ukraine,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, August 28, 2022.

balance of momentum and allow Ukraine to retake territory and defeat Russia—to outweigh the risks.\(^{145}\)

**Kherson Region Offensive**

On August 29, 2022, Ukraine launched a long-awaited offensive into the Kherson region in the south, reportedly making some initial advances.\(^{146}\) The extent of UAF success may depend on the capability of Russian forces, which have increased in number in recent weeks; sufficient equipment for UAF units; and sufficient reserves to replace casualties and exploit breakthroughs.\(^{147}\) Some observers and U.S. officials believe the latest offensive may still be part of a “shaping” strategy to improve the UAF position for future counteroffensives.\(^{148}\) Some reports indicate Ukrainian forces, advised by U.S. officials, determined a smaller offensive would give the UAF flexibility to deploy resources to other fronts and conduct multiple counteroffensives against exposed Russian lines.\(^{149}\)

By early September 2022, UAF offensives had made small but sustained progress across three fronts in Kherson, pushing back some Russian forces.\(^{150}\) UAF forces ran into significant and determined opposition, including the heavy use of artillery and air support.\(^{151}\) At the same time, the UAF began an offensive on another front, in the northeastern region of Kharkiv. Some observers thus speculated the Kherson offensive was intended as a distraction.\(^{152}\) While possible, the level and scale of UAF resources suggested the Kherson offensive was not simply a feint.

**Kharkiv Offensive**

In the Kharkiv region, the UAF appeared to exploit a weak point in Russian defenses and captured several towns (such as Balakliya) in early September 2022, potentially opening the possibility of targeting a key resupply city of Kupyansk. Some initial reports indicated that Russian defense was manned by Rosgvardiya troops not trained or equipped for frontline combat as well as by lower-quality LNR troops.\(^{153}\) The UAF appeared to consolidate an estimated core of

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\(^{152}\) Isobel Koshiw, Lorenzo Tondo and Artem Mazhulin, “Ukraine’s Southern Offensive ‘Was Designed to Trick Russia,’” *Guardian*, September 10, 2022.

five brigades to launch a counteroffensive.\textsuperscript{154} The UAF benefited from Russia pulling its most combat-effective troops south toward Kherson and from apparent Russian intelligence and command failures, as Russia failed to detect the UAF buildup and organize a coordinated response.\textsuperscript{155} Spearheaded by tanks, the UAF quickly exploited its breakthrough with high mobile units that advanced behind Russian forces, conducting ambushes and cutting off Russian reinforcements. By September 8, the UAF had broken through Russian lines and liberated almost 400 square miles, with Russia appearing unable to coordinate effective resistance or reestablish defensive lines despite rushing in reinforcements.\textsuperscript{156} The UAF also launched offensives south of Izyum and Lyman to put pressure on Russian forces, threatening to cut off Russian forces in the area.

By September 10, Russian forces had announced a withdrawal from Izyum, a symbolic statement after a near-total rout of Russian forces in the area.\textsuperscript{157} The collapse of Russian forces meant the UAF advanced so quickly that UAF command had trouble keeping track of its units.\textsuperscript{158} Many observers believe the UAF will focus on defending its recaptured territory to prevent becoming overextended. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated the offensive had gone “better than expected” and that Ukraine’s focus was on consolidating and defending the recaptured territory.\textsuperscript{159} By September 11, Russia announced it had withdrawn all forces west of the Oskil River, with Ukraine retaking more than 1,000 square miles of territory and almost all previously occupied territory in Kharkiv region.\textsuperscript{160}

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\textbf{Russian Personnel and Manpower Challenges} \\
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Since the beginning of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, analysts have noted that one of the Russian military’s greatest weaknesses is its lack of personnel. The Russian military includes two types of enlisted personnel: conscripts drafted twice a year and contract (professional) soldiers who volunteer for a fixed term of service. Since 2008, Russia has focused with limited success on recruiting contract soldiers, resulting in a mix of conscripts and contract soldiers. Russian law prohibits conscripts from combat unless a national emergency and mobilization is declared. As a result, contract soldiers are prioritized for combat units (and elite units such as VDV, Spetsnaz, and reconnaissance) and to fulfill technical positions requiring higher levels of training and knowledge. Additionally, \\
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\textsuperscript{154} President Zelensky praised the 25\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Brigade, 80\textsuperscript{th} Air Assault Brigade, and 92\textsuperscript{nd} Mechanized Brigade in a televised speech, but observers noted other units present in the initial offensive. BBC, “Zelensky Hails ‘Good News’ as Settlements Recaptured from Russia,” September 7, 2022; Marc Santora, “How Ukraine Gained Momentum Against Russia and Took a Critical Hub,” New York Times, September 10, 2022.


conscripts receive most training in their home units by contract personnel and officers, making contract personnel crucial to the overall readiness of the Russian military.

The Russian military is a tiered readiness force, with personnel levels ranging from 70% to 90% of their authorized strength. Additionally, since 2012-2014, Russia has expanded its ground forces structure by creating new units without increasing the available personnel. Michael Kofman and Rob Lee note, “Russia regressed to a partial-mobilization force, hoping to have the best of both worlds: more forces and equipment, reduced staffing and cost, plus the ability to generate substantial combat power on short notice.” However, as new units were created, the actual staffing level was reduced further due to insufficient personnel. Each Russian brigade or regiment is intended to field and deploy two Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) of 700-900 contract soldiers (a third would consist of conscripts), but it became clear that the BTGs varied in staffing levels. Some BTGs deployed with 400-600 contract personnel. The result was that the Russian military had a relatively limited core of deployable maneuver combat formations of contract personnel relative to the total size of the military.

Heavy Russian casualties have exacerbated the personnel situation. In the initial invasion, Russia mobilized an estimated 80% of its deployable units. Since Russia states its war is a “Special Military Operation,” which prohibits the use of conscripts, it has limited contract personnel and staffed units available to reinforce, rotate, and replace Russian casualties. Force quality has continued to deteriorate as units (especially elite forces) poach the best available officers and men from the lower-tiered units, which in turn do the same to the units below them (including pulling officer cadets from training schools and into command positions). This cycle undermines the quality of the unit, as those pulled up are not of the same quality and do not have sufficient training. As a result, Russia has turned to a variety of “shadow mobilization” strategies to recruit and mobilize forces to sustain offensive operations. These strategies include the following:

- Pressuring conscripts to sign as contract soldiers
- Offering high salary levels and signing bonuses for new contract soldiers (estimates range from 3-5 times the average Russian salary) and on a short-term basis (six months)
- Recruiting at least one volunteer battalion per Russian federal district, with most of these battalions reportedly forming the core of the newly established 3rd Army Corps in Mulino, Russia
- Forcing conscription of local residents in DNR/LNR (Since these territories are not Russian territory and the inhabitants not Russian citizens, they do not have the protections afforded to Russian conscripts and likely are viewed as more expendable by the Russian leadership.)
- Increasing reliance on Private Military Companies (PMCs), including the Wagner Group, to conduct offensive operations, especially in the Donetsk and Luhansk region. (PMCs reportedly have been recruiting from Russian prisons in return for a reduced sentence.)

Most observers believe these strategies are short-term solutions to avoid a politically costly decision to declare national mobilization. However, it is unclear how long these solutions will suffice and to what extent they can compensate for casualties among Russia’s professional contract soldiers. Many of these recruitment strategies compete over the same recruits, and analysts note these recruitment drives are likely coming up short of proposed goals. The strategies are further complicated by retention issues, as many volunteers reach the end of their short-term contracts. On August 29, 2022, a Pentagon official stated, “This effort is unlikely to succeed, as Russia has historically not met personnel and strength targets.... In fact, if you look at the Russian armed forces, prior to the invasion, they may have already been 150,000 personnel short of their million personnel goal.”

Observers also note these recruitment drives have lifted previous age and health restrictions, likely resulting in lower-quality candidates and recruits (in addition to large regional and ethnic disparities among new volunteers). Additionally, the extent and level of training for many of these new units is unclear. Since contract soldiers and junior officers conduct most training at the unit level, including for new conscripts, casualties to these troops likely will negatively affect the Russian military’s ability to train and prepare incoming conscript cycles and will undermine readiness in the future. However, in the event of a national mobilization, conscripts with the most recent service and personnel who served in motor rifle or elite units (VDV, Naval Infantry, Spetsnaz) likely would be among the first targeted and thereby have decreased the training requirements before deployment.

On August 25, 2022, Russian President Putin signed a decree increasing the size of the active military to 1.15 million, an increase of 137,000. Although the decree by itself does not resolve Russia’s personnel issues and does not meaningfully allow for greater recruitment, it likely reflects the Russian government planning for a protracted conflict and could provide a legal instrument to coordinate the integration and consolidation of volunteer and DNR/LNR units into the Russian military.


War Crimes

Numerous countries, the International Criminal Court, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), think tanks, and human rights organizations have identified instances of potential Russian war crimes and human rights violations in Ukraine. On April 12, 2022, an OSCE report on possible human rights violations and war crimes in Ukraine found that, “while in the circumstances a detailed assessment of most allegations of IHL (International Humanitarian Law) violations and war crimes concerning particular incidents has not been possible, the Mission found clear patterns of such violations by the Russian forces on most of the issues investigated.”

Russian forces have been accused of indiscriminate and mass killings, particularly after the discovery of mass graves and murdered civilians following the Russian military’s withdrawal from the Kyiv suburb of Bucha; rapes; and the forced “filtration” (interrogation and separation) of civilians and noncombatants from occupied territories. On July 13, 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called on Russia to “halt its systematic filtration operations and forced deportations in Russian-controlled and held areas of Ukraine.” Observers also have accused

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Russia of shelling humanitarian corridors established to allow civilians to flee urban and conflict areas and targeting civilian areas.\textsuperscript{165} Russian authorities continue to deny accusations; Russian President Putin honored one unit alleged to have conducted war crimes in Bucha for its actions in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{166}

### Outlook

With the war past its six-month mark, most observers believe there is little likelihood for political settlement or cessation of hostilities.\textsuperscript{167} Few observers expect Russia to agree to a political settlement or cease-fire unless it believes it has realized enough territorial gains to achieve its revised objectives and present a victorious narrative to domestic audiences.\textsuperscript{168} Observers continue to speculate whether Russia has the military capabilities to achieve a decisive outcome or if the UAF can sustain operations through the winter.\textsuperscript{169} For both sides, observers believe one of the most critical issues will be raising, supporting, and deploying limited resources of personnel and equipment most effectively.\textsuperscript{170}

Russia likely believes it retains advantages heading into the winter that will allow it to regain the initiative. On September 8, CIA Director William Burns stated, “Putin’s bet right now is that he is going to be tougher than the Ukrainians, the Europeans, the Americans.”\textsuperscript{171} Russia also is betting that its economy will weather international sanctions, and that international support for Ukraine will dwindle as rising energy costs take hold in Europe.\textsuperscript{172} It is unclear whether Russia’s recent battlefield failures have influenced these views.\textsuperscript{173}


\textsuperscript{166} The U.S. State Department has identified Russia’s 76\textsuperscript{th} Guards Air Assault Division, its subordinate 234\textsuperscript{th} Guards Air Assault Regiment, and the 64\textsuperscript{th} Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade as involved in possible war crimes in Bucha. U.S. State Department, “Targeting Russia’s War Machine, Sanctions Evaders, Military Units Credibly Implicated in Human Rights Abuses, and Russian Federation Officials Involved in Suppression of Dissent,” fact sheet, June 28, 2022; See also Bryan Pietsch, “ Putin Honors Brigade Accused of War Crimes in Bucha,” \textit{Washington Post}, April 19, 2022; and Jade McGlynn, “ Russia’s War Crime Denials Are Fuel for More Atrocities,” \textit{Foreign Policy}, April 23, 2022.


Russia has suffered significant equipment losses, including tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and artillery systems. These losses have forced Russia to pull older systems out of storage and deploy them to the battlefield. Additionally, some reports indicate Russia is mobilizing its defense industry to retool and repair a variety of modern and older systems, including new legislation giving the government “special economic measures” to control and compel the work of the defense industry. However, even with these measures and considering the losses suffered, it will take several months before production can be mobilized to full production capacity. Even at full production, it is unclear how long and to what extent Russia can replace equipment losses.

Observers are more skeptical regarding Russia’s ability to procure key components for advanced weaponry (including microchips) and if countries (such as China or India) are willing to bear the risks to assist Russia in avoiding export controls. Captured and destroyed Russian weaponry have demonstrated the extent to which Russia has circumvented export controls and sanctions, as well as the extent to which it has adapted civilian technology for military use. It is unclear if Russia has sufficient stockpiles of critical components to continue producing advanced weaponry or if its ability to replenish stockpiles is limited.

Some have speculated about the potential for Russia to use nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons if Russian policymakers perceive inadequate military advances or to demonstrate capability. Most analysts, however, believe the likelihood of Russia’s use of nuclear weapons remains low. CIA Director Burns said the United States has not “seen a lot of practical evidence of the kind of deployments or military dispositions that would reinforce that concern.”

For Ukraine, there is optimism, as some observers believe momentum has swung in its favor as the UAF retakes territory across the country, and the Russian military continues to retreat. Ukraine’s Commander in Chief Valery Zaluzhny stated on September 7, “for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the situation will be a complex mix of the actual location of the line of contact, the available resources, the pool of combat-ready forces, and, obviously, the strategic initiative that

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175 Alberto Nardelli, “Russia Turns to Old Tanks as It Burns Through Weapons in Ukraine,” Bloomberg, June 14, 2022.


will remain in the enemy’s hands.”

Despite being underequipped, UAF forces continue to demonstrate high levels of operational and tactical flexibility to sustain operations. As the conflict shifts away from the Donbas to southern Ukraine, the UAF likely needs continued support to replace lost equipment and support transitioning toward NATO-style weaponry.

Ukraine’s recent Kharkiv offensive saw the UAF capture large quantities of Russian weaponry and ammunition that can be used to replenish UAF stocks. The conflict has consumed significant amounts of ammunition, and the UAF likely needs replenishment of ammunition, assistance and advice in equipment maintenance and repair, and continued training of personnel. Additionally, Ukraine continues to benefit from high levels of volunteers, and foreign support for training will likely give Ukraine a personnel advantage as Russia continues to exhibit recruitment problems.

Congress is poised to continue to track developments in the war in Ukraine closely, especially as it considers U.S. and international efforts to support Ukraine militarily and respond to events on the ground.

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184 Such as tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, reconnaissance and surveillance systems, medium-range air defenses, and mobile artillery. CRS In Focus IF12040, U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine, by Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt.

185 Jack Detsch, “Russia Is Supplying Ukraine with Lightly Used Tanks,” Foreign Policy, September 13, 2022.