

*How Likely is it that Vladimir Putin will be able to Claim some sort of Victory in Ukraine? An Assessment based on Events from February-early November 2022*

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**The Aims of the *Special Operation***

On 24 February 2022, Russian forces launched what Vladimir Putin described as a *special operation* in Ukraine. The operation was launched in the light of failure to find a diplomatic solution to what in Russian government eyes were the problems of NATO eastward expansion and the right of Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine – and specifically in the Donetsk (DPR) and Luhansk (LPR) People’s Republics – to a meaningful degree of self-determination.

In many senses, the *special operation* is a continuation of Russian operations in Ukraine since 2014, when in the aftermath of what might be termed either a pro-Western revolution or coup in Ukraine depending on perspective, Russia seized the Crimea. Subsequently, Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine – that had initially seized much of the Donbass region - lost ground to a combination of Ukrainian government forces and other pro-Ukrainian groups before the increasingly obvious intervention of

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Russian forces stabilised the military situation.<sup>2</sup> Only on 21 February 2022 did Russia formally recognise the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics, as a precursor to formal military intervention.<sup>3</sup> Ukraine's failure to implement the *Minsk II Accords* of 2015 – and subsequent steps to undermine the rights of Russian language speakers through language laws - can be seen as catalysts for the Russian intervention of February 2022 in eastern Ukraine and associated attempt to overthrow or at least force significant concessions from the Ukrainian government in Kyiv.<sup>4</sup> With Russian forces subsequently in control of much of the eastern and south-eastern Ukraine, in late September 2022 referenda were conducted in the Russian-held regions of Ukraine in which the vast majority of those participating in the votes were reported as having expressed their desire to join Russia, leading to the incorporation of four new regions into the Russian Federation.<sup>5</sup>

According to Vladimir Putin's key speech of 24 February the *special operation* in Ukraine was launched with a view to honouring "treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic" that had been ratified by the Duma only two days before.<sup>6</sup> Putin also noted that Ukraine represented a threat to Russian-controlled Crimea – and hence it is reasonable to

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<sup>2</sup> For a short summary of the war in Ukraine from 2014 to 2018 see Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine* (Barnsley: Osprey Publishing, 2019), pp. 12-18. For an interesting and more detailed account of some of the fighting in 2014-2015 in Russian from a Russian perspective see Mikhail Polikarpov, *Donbass. Piat' let srazhenii i pobed. ...* (Moscow: Knizhnii mir, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See [Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 21.02.2022 № 71 · Официальное опубликование правовых актов · Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации \(pravo.gov.ru\)](#) and [Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 21.02.2022 № 72 · Официальное опубликование правовых актов · Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации \(pravo.gov.ru\)](#) [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>4</sup> See for example, [Ukraine unlikely to advance Minsk II despite talks \(eiu.com\)](#), 11 January 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022] and [New Language Requirement Raises Concerns in Ukraine | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#), 19 January 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022]. The language laws concerned can be found here [Про забезпечення функціону... | від 25.04.2019 № 2704-VIII \(rada.gov.ua\)](#) [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>5</sup> [Treaties on accession of Donbass and other liberated territories to Russia signed - Russian Politics & Diplomacy - TASS](#), 30 September 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>6</sup> [State Duma ratifies treaties on friendship, cooperation, mutual assistance with DPR, LPR - Russian Politics & Diplomacy - TASS](#), 22 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

suggest that the *special operation* also sought to enhance the security of what for Vladimir Putin is an undoubtedly an indivisible part of Russia.<sup>7</sup>

The *special operation* also has a wider stated aim - to “demilitarise and denazify Ukraine.”<sup>8</sup> Just exactly what this meant and would require remains unclear, although the notion of *Nazis* in Ukraine refers back to Ukrainian nationalist groups of the period of the Second World War and their successors, and in particular to those right-wing paramilitary groups involved in operations against separatists such as the notorious Azov Battalion that was subsequently incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard.<sup>9</sup> This statement also has to be seen in the context of Russian attempts to prevent further eastward expansion of NATO into Ukraine. On 24 February, Vladimir Putin also made it plain that the *special operation* was launched in the context of NATO expansion into former Soviet territories – and with the implicit aim of bringing a halt to that expansion.<sup>10</sup> Even the pro-Western President Yeltsin was on record expressing concern over NATO’s eastward expansion into former Soviet territory, and Vladimir Putin has frequently expressed disquiet over it as NATO expansion in the east picked up speed.<sup>11</sup>

In his 24 February speech, Vladimir Putin explicitly stated that “it is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory” – something for which Russia has clearly never committed sufficient resources.<sup>12</sup> This fact has not stopped Western politicians from subsequently and regularly repeating the erroneous the idea that Russian intent was to occupy the whole of Ukraine. For example, even on 26 June – long after Russian forces

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<sup>7</sup> [Address by the President of the Russian Federation • President of Russia \(kremlin.ru\)](#), 24 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For a short history of the Azov Battalion, see [Factbox: Last defenders of Mariupol: what is Ukraine's Azov Regiment? | Reuters](#), 17 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022] and Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine*, p. 55. For a more scholarly assessment of the Azov Battalion prior to the Russian invasion of February 2022, see Teemu Saressalo and Aki-Mauri Huhtinen, “The Information Blitzkrieg – “Hybrid” Operations Azov Style,” *The journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, 4 (2018): pp. 423-443.

<sup>10</sup> [Address by the President of the Russian Federation • President of Russia \(kremlin.ru\)](#), 24 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>11</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, [NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard | National Security Archive \(gwu.edu\)](#), 16 March 2018 [Accessed 10 November 2022]. On Putin and NATO, see for example [Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy • President of Russia \(kremlin.ru\)](#), 10 February 2007 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>12</sup> [Address by the President of the Russian Federation • President of Russia \(kremlin.ru\)](#), 24 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

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had pulled out of the bulk of Ukrainian territory west of the Dnepr - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated in an interview with CNN at the G7 summit in Germany that Putin's "strategic objective was to end Ukraine's sovereignty and independence, to erase it from the map, to subsume it in Russia."<sup>13</sup> Just how much of Ukraine Russia has sought to occupy at various points in the *special operation* so far is debateable. It seems highly likely that Russian intentions to hold on to territory in the south changed in the light of the progress of the war – something that Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov suggested was the case in July.<sup>14</sup> Even in September Vladimir Putin suggested that an aim of the war was the "liquidation of an anti-Russian enclave" in Ukraine – where "enclave" suggests only part of Ukraine, but could feasibly refer to as much of eastern Ukraine as Putin saw fit,<sup>15</sup> and by September certainly those regions incorporated into the Russian Federation. As the war drags on however it is likely that hypothetical Russian territorial ambitions will increase beyond the capture of the remaining territory of those regions incorporated into the Russian Federation as the Russian leadership looks for a longer-term solution to the problem of a hostile and intransigent Ukraine with ambitions to join both the EU and NATO within what is perceived as very much a Russian sphere of influence.

As such, the *special operation* can be seen to have four key aims – aims that have not been modified in any meaningful way by subsequent pronouncements from the Kremlin unless one includes the fact that the Donetsk and Lugansk republics have now been incorporated into the Russian Federation – something that was always a likely outcome from their independences. The four clearly stated aims of the *special operation* are therefore:

- 1) To protect and sustain the territorial integrities of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics – a key element to which is to assist them in gaining control of all of the territory they claim in the Donbass region. To those two regions can now be added two more – the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions

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<sup>13</sup> [Secretary Antony J. Blinken With Jake Tapper of State of the Union with Jake Tapper on CNN - United States Department of State](#), 26 June 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>14</sup> [Russia declares expanded war goals beyond Ukraine's Donbas | Reuters](#), 20 July 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>15</sup> [Владимир Путин назвал целью спецоперации ликвидацию антироссийского анклава на Украине - Новости – Мир – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 1 September 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

- the incorporation of which into the Russian Federation can in part be justified under the second point here.
- 2) To guarantee the security of Crimea from future Ukrainian attempts to reincorporate it into Ukraine –the recent attack on the Russian bridge to Crimea<sup>16</sup> certainly highlighting the value of having a land bridge to Crimea through the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.
  - 3) To halt the eastward expansion of NATO – and in particular the incorporation of Ukraine into the NATO alliance.
  - 4) To *demilitarise and denazify* Ukraine – a vague ambition that seems as a minimum to require the ejection of Ukrainian forces from eastern Ukraine but certainly seems also to have suggested imposing a government on Ukraine favourable to Russia.

With Russian military operations initially beset by a host of problems – not least of which was unexpectedly stiff Ukrainian opposition, logistical issues and the scale of NATO support for Ukraine –ambitious initial Russian battlefield aims that included seizing Kyiv were quickly scaled back and the war has settled into a more attritional struggle over more limited Russian objectives in the east. In the light of Ukrainian counterattacks in both the south and north – with those in the north seeing the recapturing of significant territory – Russian aims on the ground are now likely in the first instance to hold ground currently occupied – now incorporated into Russia - before the impact of reserves called-up in September can be felt and Russian forces may be able to undertake further limited offensive operations to secure the remainder of the Donetsk and other Russian-annexed regions.<sup>17</sup>

Although Russia’s war aims in Ukraine very quickly did not include the capture of Kyiv and *regime change*, in a wider sense however Western sanctions and support for Ukraine soon turned the war into something bigger than simply an attempt to seize territory in the east or even to compel the Ukrainian government to take up some sort of

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<sup>16</sup> See for example [Crimean bridge: Who - or what - caused the explosion? - BBC News](#), 9 October 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>17</sup> See for example [Власти сообщили о создании укрепрайонов на севере Запорожской области - Новости – Общество – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 6 November 2022 [Accessed 6 November 2022]. On the call-up of reserves, see below.

position of neutrality on the international stage. In July 2022, Vladimir Putin made it quite clear in a presentation to Duma representatives that he considers that the “collective West” has sought to undermine Russian influence in its own backyard through interference in Ukrainian affairs, having “organised and supported the unconstitutional armed coup in Ukraine in 2014 and then encouraged and justified genocide against the people of Donbass.” Western involvement in Ukrainian affairs was portrayed as part of Western imposition of “a model of totalitarian liberalism” on the world.<sup>18</sup> With Western government having goaded the Ukrainian government of Volodymyr Zelensky into a no compromise stance (which would have been unthinkable without the current levels of Western support) – and with the West committed to back Ukraine for as long as it takes in its war against Russia – the war has become in effect a proxy war between the West and Russia for influence in a region historically dominated by Russia.<sup>19</sup> Certainly within Russia the war has increasingly been portrayed as one not only with Ukraine, but also a proxy one with NATO.<sup>20</sup>

### ***The Special Operation – the Initial Phase***

The initial strength of Russian forces committed to the *special operation* in Ukraine is widely accepted in the Western mainstream press – based on US assessments - to have been somewhere in the region of 190,000 troops. Such a figure would have represented a very significant proportion of Russia’s ground forces nominally available for operations outside Russia - and a subsequent figure of 142,000 that is circulating in more specialist publications is more reasonable.<sup>21</sup> By May US sources were suggesting

<sup>18</sup> [Meeting with State Duma leaders and party faction heads • President of Russia \(kremlin.ru\)](#), 7 July 2022 and [Союзные силы уверенно решают задачи в рамках спецоперации, заявил Лавров - РИА Новости, 18.07.2022 \(ria.ru\)](#) [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>19</sup> See for example [Ukraine Seeks Full Restoration of Territory, Including Crimea, Zelensky Says \(wsj.com\)](#), 3 May 2022 and [NATO - News: Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government \(Brussels 2022\), 24-Mar.-2022](#) respectively [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>20</sup> See for example [\(18\) Francis Scarr on Twitter: "As Russian state TV seeks a way to explain why the "special operation in Ukraine" is dragging on so much, there's more and more talk of a war being fought against Nato RT boss Margarita Simonyan is the latest to make the claim \(with subs\) https://t.co/P443cM4v3X" / Twitter](#), 16 April 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>21</sup> [Russia has massed up to 190,000 personnel in and near Ukraine, U.S. says | Reuters](#), 18 February 2022 and [Russia’s Ill-Fated Invasion of Ukraine: Lessons in Modern Warfare | Center for Strategic and International Studies \(csis.org\)](#), 1 June 2022 respectively [Accessed 9 November 2022].

that Russia had deployed 110 Battalion Tactical Groups (hereafter BTGs) in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Russian strength was augmented by forces of the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics in the east – where their value should not be underestimated. Many such troops have considerable combat experience and motivation – such that Vladimir Putin made the claim in early September that they have been fighting “better than professional troops.”<sup>23</sup>

Russian forces certainly have not had the sort of technological edge – augmented by superior training and other less tangible factors – enjoyed by Western forces in circumstances such as the invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003 and that would have acted as a significant force multiplier. Indeed, from an equipment point of view the Russian armed forces haven’t even committed much of their latest equipment in the ground war. For example, the much publicised T-14 “Armata” tank has not been used in Ukraine despite it having entered series production at the end of 2021 – whereas aged Soviet-era T-62Ms have.<sup>24</sup> Not committing such weapons systems in Ukraine may increasingly relate to the risk of such systems falling into Ukrainian – and therefore Western – hands.<sup>25</sup> In fact it is feasible to argue that the direct provision of some of the latest Western weapons system to Ukraine and indirect support in terms of technology-dependent means of intelligence gathering have increasingly given Ukraine an overall technological edge.<sup>26</sup> The technological boost being given to Ukraine is being provided in circumstances where both sides have been using considerable quantities of former Soviet equipment, albeit often with post-Soviet modification as in the case of Ukrainian

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<sup>22</sup> [Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing > U.S. Department of Defense > Transcript](#), 26 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>23</sup> [Путин: добровольцы из Донбасса воюют лучше, чем профессиональные военные - Новости – Мир – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 5 September 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>24</sup> [В "Ростехе" сообщили о запуске серийного производства танка "Армата" \(interfax.ru\)](#), 24 December 2021 and [Танки Т-62М: как работает броня этих машин \(topwar.ru\)](#), 22 August 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>25</sup> On this issue, see <https://topwar.ru/202109-rossijskij-lend-liz-verhovnyj-glavnokomandujuschij-objazan-vmeshatsja.html>, 27 September 2022 and <https://topwar.ru/202055-pochemu-brosili-t-90m-v-ukrainskom-lesu.html>, 20 September 2022 [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>26</sup> In addition to Harpoon anti-ship missiles and the HIMARS rocket system mentioned elsewhere in this article, see also [The US Has Quietly Given Ukraine Anti-Radar Missiles to Fight Russia \(businessinsider.com\)](#), 17 August 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

T-64BM and aforementioned Russian T-62Ms.<sup>27</sup> If Ukraine continues to receive modern Western equipment – such as the US-manufactured tanks that may soon be supplied – then Ukraine’s technological edge in many areas will undoubtedly increase.<sup>28</sup> For Russia the fact that much of its equipment relies on microchips produced abroad is undoubtedly a serious issue, and one unlikely to be resolved quickly unless China feels it is necessary to prop up Russia in this regard.<sup>29</sup>

Issues with command and control and leadership at junior levels – to be discussed later in greater depth - have undoubtedly acted as the opposite of a force multiplier for Russian forces. Indeed, many Western commentators have suggested with some foundation that Western input in Ukrainian training since 2014 has had an impact on the battlefield effectiveness of the Ukrainian armed forces that began the war in February.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, members of the armed forces of the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics report having seen improvement in Ukrainian military effectiveness attributed to Western training as early as 2015.<sup>31</sup> Only in the air and at sea can it be argued that Russian forces have had significant and sustained superiority during the *special operation* itself. Superiority in the air was in part because the ongoing war in the Donbass from 2014-2022 did not see the deployment of Russian airpower that would have required significant augmentation of Ukrainian air defence capabilities – meaning that those capabilities had not reached the same level as those of its army by February 2022.<sup>32</sup>

Nonetheless, at the same time as Russian armoured and mechanised infantry spearheads were being blunted on the Kyiv axis, a variety of Western-supplied light

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<sup>27</sup> [Ukraine’s Tanks Could Be Better Than Russia’s. It Might Not Matter. \(forbes.com\)](https://www.forbes.com), 15 December 2021 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>28</sup> See [Senior Defense Official and Senior Military Official Hold a Background Briefing > U.S. Department of Defense > Transcript](#), 19 September 2022 and [Why Germany and the US Are Stalling on Modern Tanks for Ukraine - BNN Bloomberg](#), 28 September 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>29</sup> [U.S. Technology, a Longtime Tool for Russia, Becomes a Vulnerability - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com), 2 June 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>30</sup> For a relatively muted expression of this line, see [Ukraine Transformed Its Own Military, but U.S. Training Still Helps \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://www.foreignpolicy.com), 9 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

<sup>31</sup> See for example Mikhail Polikarpov, *Donbass. Piat’ let srazhenii i pobed. ...*, pp. 382-3.

<sup>32</sup> For some indication of the disparity between the air forces and air defence assets of Russia and Ukraine prior to the war, see The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), Chapter 5.



anti-aircraft weapons played a part in preventing Russian forces from exploiting numerical superiority in the air, and in particular hindered operations by Russian helicopters.<sup>33</sup> Despite initial Russian strikes against Ukrainian air defence targets, the Russian VVS was unable to knock out the Ukrainian air defence system. Very soon Western-supplied man-portable anti-aircraft missiles were being augmented with longer-range air defence systems, effectively limiting Russian conventional airpower to pre-frontal action.<sup>34</sup> As an August article in the Russian periodical *Voennoe obozrenie* has pointed out, in many ways it has been Western assistance in target identification and information management that has been a particular boon for Ukrainian air defences.<sup>35</sup>

At the very beginning of the *special operation*, Russian airborne forces that briefly seized the Hostomel airport in a *coup de main* effort near Kyiv were soon subjected to fierce Ukrainian counterattacks and cut off from aerial resupply and support.<sup>36</sup> Ukrainian forces continue to receive new anti-aircraft systems from Western governments that further hamper Russian ability to effectively use conventional airpower.<sup>37</sup> Where possible, both sides have resorted to the use of drones in place of manned aircraft as drones have offered economy in both a human and material sense for their operators. This in many ways mirrors a trend towards drone use in earlier fighting prior to the *special operation*.<sup>38</sup> Naval drones have also been used by Ukraine to attack Russian shipping.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> [Переносные зенитные ракетные комплексы в вооруженных силах Украины \(topwar.ru\)](https://topwar.ru/161111-perenosnye-zenitnye-raketnye-komplekсы-v-vooruzhennykh-silah-ukrainy/), 31 August 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022]

<sup>34</sup> The German IRIS-T system being an example of the sort of technology that Western government are willing to supply to Ukraine. See [Ukraine to receive modern IRIS-T air defence system from Germany in October – ambassador | Ukrayinska Pravda](https://ukrayinska-pravda.com/en/ukraine-to-receive-modern-iris-t-air-defence-system-from-germany-in-october-ambassador/), 11 June 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>35</sup> [Господство в небе Украины: миф или не совсем? \(topwar.ru\)](https://topwar.ru/161111-gospodstvo-v-nebe-ukrainy-mif-ili-ne-sovsem/), 10 August 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>36</sup> On the initial Ukrainian counterattacks, see [Pictures: In Battle for Hostomel, Ukraine Drove Back Russia's Attack Helicopters and Elite Paratroopers - 19FortyFive](https://19fortyfive.com/2022/02/25/pictures-in-battle-for-hostomel-ukraine-drove-back-russias-attack-helicopters-and-elite-paratroopers/), 25 February 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>37</sup> See for example <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-us-nasams-air-defense/32051444.html>, 25 September 2022 [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>38</sup> See [How the Ukraine drone war is changing the game on the battlefield \(newatlas.com\)](https://newatlas.com/ukraine-drone-war/), 22 September 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022]. On earlier use of drones in the Donbass prior to the *special operation*, see Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>39</sup> [Military briefing: Ukraine raid heralds new era of naval drone warfare | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](https://www.ft.com/content/ukraine-raid-heralds-new-era-of-naval-drone-warfare), 1 November 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

To a considerable extent, apparent Ukrainian confidence in continuing the war for the foreseeable future and not negotiating with Russia over territory stems not only from enthusiastic Western support but the fact that, at the beginning of the *special operation*, the Russian army's poorly co-ordinated, supplied and supported attack on the Kyiv axis met with unexpectedly heavy opposition and soon faltered.<sup>40</sup> On the Kyiv axis the initial Russian attack was extremely lightweight – and focused on a *coup de main* assault on Hostomel airbase – the capacity and location of which would in theory have given Russian forces relatively straightforward access to government quarters in Kyiv.<sup>41</sup> In subsequent operations from the north in particular, inadequate infantry support for tank-heavy battle groups meant that Western-supplied anti-tank weapons such as the much-vaunted Javelin allowed mobile infantry-based Ukrainian forces, adopting almost irregular tactics, to destroy considerable Russian armoured strength.<sup>42</sup> This performance should not however be allowed to hide the fact that Russian thrusts from Crimea and to a lesser extent in the Donbass were able to secure significant territory within a relatively short space of time.<sup>43</sup>

The battalion-sized battle groups (BTGs) on which the Russian army had been relying in the Donbass even before the beginning of the *special operation* have certainly proved fragile in prolonged conflict – something that was already apparent from sustained operations in the Donbass since 2014.<sup>44</sup> Such battalion-sized battle groups have to a large extent been a product of the fact the Russian armed forces are still reliant on conscripts for around a third of their manpower. With the legal situation within Russia being such that conscripts are still only supposed to be deployed on Russian territory for much of their service, only battalion-sized units reliant on contract service personnel could be drawn from larger *parent* units for operations in Ukraine.

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<sup>40</sup> See Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson and Johan Norberg, “A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War,” *Survival* 64, 3 (2022): pp. 8-9.

<sup>41</sup> [Эксперт объяснил значение киевского аэродрома Гостомель для спецоперации - МК \(mk.ru\)](#), 25 February 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>42</sup> [To Knock Out Russian Tanks And Survive, Ukrainian Missileers Have Learned To Shoot And Scoot \(forbes.com\)](#), 2 April 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>43</sup> [Russia's invasion of Ukraine in maps – latest updates | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#) [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>44</sup> On the BTGs in the Donbass during the early phases of the fighting for the region after 2014, see Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine*, pp. 38-40.

Russian commanders have clearly struggled to command multiple BTGs to good effect. The larger brigade and even divisional-size units operating along similar principles to the battalion groups that have been the intended result of reform of the Russian armed forces have not been deployed in Ukraine.<sup>45</sup> Whether the change in status of Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine to constituent parts of the Russian Federation will – in the longer-term – allow for the use of full brigade-strength units with both contract and conscript personnel remains to be seen given the potential impact on Russian morale of the widespread deployment of conscripts into combat situations, but the option will increasingly be there to do so. Certainly, if current talk in Russian governmental circles about the possibility of extending the conscription period in Russia from one to two years leads to such a move, then the deployment of such units and formations will become more viable.<sup>46</sup>

During the early phases of the war, it was apparent that the Russian BTGs did not have the requisite level of infantry (and indeed artillery) support for their armour that was being unimaginatively funnelled down relatively narrow axes of advance.<sup>47</sup> The available combined arms elements were poorly co-ordinated and at times poorly led – with the top-down Russian chain of command seeing relatively senior officers having to move forward to get a stalled advance moving - contributing to the relatively high loss rate amongst them.<sup>48</sup> Certainly, the more *mission-command* approach that in theory is something to which the Russian armed forces now aspire does not seem to have permeated down to the roots of the system.<sup>49</sup> The sort of cultural shift required for such a transformation is a significant one, and one likely to take considerable time even with the appropriate will. The perennial problem for the Russian (and previously

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<sup>45</sup> On these reforms see Igor Sutyagin with Justin Bronk, “Russia’s New Ground Forces: Capabilities, Limitations and Implications for International Security,” *RUSI Whitehall Paper*, no. 89 (2017): pp. 24-42.

<sup>46</sup> See [Увеличение срока службы в армии: что об этом известно - Ведомости \(vedomosti.ru\)](https://vedomosti.ru), 3 November 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>47</sup> Specifically on the inadequate infantry component to the BTGs, see Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, [Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military’s Ill-Fated Force Design - War on the Rocks](https://www.warontherocks.com), 2 June 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/05/06/high-death-toll-of-russian-generals-in-ukraine-a-blow-to-military-capability-a77609> [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>49</sup> See for example Dmitry Adamsky, “Russian campaign in Syria – change and continuity in strategic culture,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, 1 (2020): pp. 115-7.

Soviet) armed forces in not having an effective senior NCO corps continues to plague Russian combat effectiveness.<sup>50</sup>

That relatively senior Russian officers have had to move further forward than was arguably desirable was not helped by the fact that Russian communications and logistics proved inadequate for the sort of mobile operations demanded during the early phases of the war, and particularly on the Kyiv axis. Russian communications have proven both fragile and far from secure during the war to date – complicating the task of Russian mid-level commanders left with disparate elements to command outside a coherent brigade or divisional organisation.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, to add a further element hampering the rapid-tempo operations demanded at the beginning of the war, logistical support was inadequate for anything more than short-duration operations close to railheads.<sup>52</sup> Logistical problems have in part been caused by the proliferation of weapons and vehicles being employed by Russian forces. For example, the fact that Russian forces employ so many different calibres of artillery systems significantly complicates their supply.<sup>53</sup> The removal of deputy defence minister Dmitrii Bulgakov from his position in September undoubtedly related to logistical shortcomings in the war to date.<sup>54</sup>

There are two areas in which Russia has maintained a qualitative and quantitative edge over Ukraine, and those are in longer-range missiles and in naval power. Although Russian medium-range missiles such as Iskander were used in the initial days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the use of such stand-off weapons increased in the face of Russia's failure to cripple Ukrainian air defences and of failures on the ground. To some extent, Russia was, and is, able to continue to strike into the depth of Ukraine beyond the range of its artillery thanks to its sizeable arsenal of short-

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<sup>50</sup> For a concise summary of some of the issues surrounding the creation of a stronger NCO corps, see Mark Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2017), pp. 42-3.

<sup>51</sup> Sam Cranny-Evans and Dr Thomas Withington, [Russian Comms in Ukraine: A World of Hertz | Royal United Services Institute \(rusi.org\)](#), 9 March 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>52</sup> [Why the Russian military is bogged down by logistics in Ukraine - The Washington Post](#), 30 March 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>53</sup> [Зачем российской армии такая артиллерия? \(topwar.ru\)](#), 5 September 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>54</sup> [Заместитель министра обороны Дмитрий Булгаков освобожден от должности - Новости – Политика – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 24 September 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

medium range missiles. Although the more contemporary Iskander system has proven effective both in terms of accuracy and avoiding countermeasures, Russia's supply of this missile is limited and it has been reserved for particularly high priority targets.<sup>55</sup>

In the face of very limited numbers of Iskander missiles, Russia initially apparently fell back on its arsenal of updated Soviet-era missiles such as the Tochka-U system – a system supposedly retired from service prior to the *special operation*.<sup>56</sup> These weapons – while relatively abundant – were far more vulnerable to countermeasures than the Iskander and their accuracy has clearly proven to be too poor to hit military targets in built up areas with any regularity.<sup>57</sup> The inaccuracy of such missiles – and resulting civilian casualties – can be seen to cause more damage to the Russian war effort than the damage being caused against intended targets. Indeed, more recently Russia has been using Iranian-supplied drones to greater effect than when using its Tochka missiles – in the recent case against Ukrainian infrastructural targets and in particular the power grid.<sup>58</sup> Unless the US and other Western powers are going to supply Ukraine with longer-range ordnance than that currently being provided for the HIMARS system for example or a meaningful supply of larger drones, then Russia retains something of an advantage in this sphere even if further production and acquisition of such weapons may be hampered by sanctions. Possible Ukrainian strikes against Crimea such as that of 9 August 2022 are likely to remain the exception rather than the rule if Ukraine is reliant on its own resources, while Ukraine's Western allies have some interest in not being seen to be escalating the conflict by providing Ukraine with the capability to strike targets deep within Russia.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> [ОТРК «Искандер»: все так, как мы предупреждали \(topwar.ru\)](https://topwar.ru/161111-otpk-iskander-vse-tak-kak-my-preduprezhdali/), 1 April 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>56</sup> See for example [Russian Tochka-U ballistic missiles spotted in occupied Melitopol \(defence-blog.com\)](https://defence-blog.com/2022/07/13/russian-tochka-u-ballistic-missiles-spotted-in-occupied-melitopol/), 13 July 2022 and [«Мы свидетели последних пусков «Точек-У» в истории» - Газета.Ru \(gazeta.ru\)](https://gazeta.ru/2022/03/20/my-svideteli-poslednix-puskov-tochek-u-v-istorii/), 20 March 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022]. The 2022 edition of the ISS's *Military Balance* did not contain the Tochka-U missile as in service with Russian forces, but did for Ukraine. See The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021*, p. 209.

<sup>57</sup> [ОТРК «Искандер»: все так, как мы предупреждали \(topwar.ru\)](https://topwar.ru/161111-otpk-iskander-vse-tak-kak-my-preduprezhdali/), 1 April 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>58</sup> See for example [Russian Air Attacks on Ukraine's Power System | Wilson Center](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/2022/10/19/russian-air-attacks-on-ukraine-s-power-system/), 19 October 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>59</sup> [Saky airfield: Ukraine claims Crimea blasts responsibility after denial - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/ukraine-62844444), 7 September 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

Despite setbacks Russia's Black Sea Fleet has maintained a considerable superiority over Ukrainian naval forces – having been reinforced with additional landing ships prior to the beginning of the *special operation*.<sup>60</sup> As on the Kyiv axis however, Russian forces initially showed an overconfidence on the naval flank that would soon prove not to have been warranted. The loss of the cruiser *Moskva* in April was, like the heavy losses amongst armoured forces on the Kyiv axis, an indication that Russian forces had not taken the Ukrainian armed forces as seriously as they should – and particularly when the Ukrainians were being supported by Western intelligence (as seems to have been the case in this instance).<sup>61</sup> Although the *Moskva* was reportedly sunk with Ukrainian Neptune missiles,<sup>62</sup> there is evidence that Ukrainian forces have received more than just Western intelligence in the naval war against Russia. In June a Russian tugboat was apparently sunk with Western-supplied Harpoon missiles, and Ukrainian personnel had received training in their use from the US.<sup>63</sup> The threat from Ukrainian maritime drones – as evidenced in the recent attack on the Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol – is a further inhibitor on Russian naval activity.<sup>64</sup>

While Russian naval superiority was evident in its capture of the strategically important Snake Island at the beginning of the war, it was later abandoned by Russian forces. Located less than 35 km from the mainland, the island was within range not only of Ukrainian Tochka-U missiles but also other artillery and rocket systems. As Russian sources have suggested, in the face of Ukrainian forces supported by Western intelligence, trying to hold on to the island regardless of cost didn't make sense given that any assets on the island would be densely packed and an ideal target.<sup>65</sup> The Russian abandoning of Snake Island has been presented as a Ukrainian success, while

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<sup>60</sup> «Корабли для наступления»: российский флот в Черном море. Чего ждать Крыму и что угрожает Украине? ([krymr.com](http://krymr.com)), 9 February 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61343044>, 6 May 2022 [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>62</sup> [Meet the Neptune: Ukraine's Homemade Cruise Missile That Struck the Moskva - 19FortyFive](#), 14 April 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>63</sup> [Ukrainian forces who sank a Russian warship with Harpoon missiles had US training, official says | Business Insider India](#), 9 September 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>64</sup> [Ukraine uses naval suicide drones for the first time against Russian fleet in Crimea \(lemonde.fr\)](#), 4 November 2022, [Suspected Ukrainian Explosive Sea Drone Made From Recreational Watercraft Parts - USNI News](#), 11 October 2022 and [Zelensky: Ukraine to start fundraising for marine drones fleet \(kyivindependent.com\)](#), 5 November 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>65</sup> [Почему российские вооружённые силы оставили остров Змеиный, насколько это оправданно, поражение это или нет? \(topwar.ru\)](#), 18 July 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

the Russian claims that the island was abandoned as a “gesture of goodwill” in terms of allowing the export of Ukrainian grain by sea does not seem convincing.<sup>66</sup> However, Russian willingness to abandon the island – despite the propaganda coup it handed Ukraine – is undoubtedly indicative of an increased pragmatism on the part of Russian commanders and politicians that will save lives and material and ultimately help rather than hinder military success. The recent abandonment of territory of the Kherson region on the western bank of the Dnepr River has also handed Ukraine a propaganda coup, but makes considerable military sense and will undoubtedly facilitate Russian operations elsewhere in the longer term.<sup>67</sup>

### Russian Operations in Historical Perspective

In many ways there are strong parallels to be drawn between the way that poorly prepared and supported Russian forces in Ukraine were initially hurled forward with reckless abandon by senior commanders and a similar approach taken throughout the Soviet period and into the post-Soviet Russia. This author has written about the Russian cultural tendency towards an initial reckless approach to many operations during the period of the Second World War – tied to the wider cultural tendency towards acting *na avos/на авось* – leaving many details of an operation already underway to fate rather than attempting to predict and amend the plan to account for changing circumstances. In part this tendency owed much to a fatalism born out of feelings of powerless lower down the social chain of command – and is still very much relevant today.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, apparent Russian underestimation of Ukrainian capabilities and morale at the very highest level can be seen to have historical parallels in the sense that it seems that both in the case of Stalin and Putin senior military and intelligence officers were unwilling to provide accurate information on enemy capabilities where there was plenty of information available.

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<sup>66</sup> [Россия в качестве жеста доброй воли вывела гарнизон с острова Змеиный - РИА Новости, 30.06.2022 \(ria.ru\)](https://ria.ru/20220630/rossiya-v-kachestve-zhesta-dobroy-voли-vyvela-garnizon-s-ostrova-zmeinyy-1770000000.html) [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>67</sup> [Минобороны сообщило о выводе на левый берег Днепра более 30 тыс. военных - Новости – Политика – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5444444), 11 November 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>68</sup> See Alexander Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 573-4.

For the military historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, the Russian attempt to win the war in Ukraine with an ambitious – arguably reckless – strike towards Kyiv comes as no surprise, nor does the subsequent adaptation in strategy and acceptance that such brazen offensive operations needed to be replaced with something more methodical. During the Great Patriotic War Soviet operations would all too frequently involve attempts to *rush* an objective before being forced to settle into a more methodical approach.<sup>69</sup> More recently, this can be seen to have been the approach taken during the first Chechen War in late 1994 and early 1995 with the first battle for the Chechen capital, Groznii. The Russian attempt to seize Groznii was initially beaten back, with the subsequent more methodical approach accepting weaknesses in Russian command-and-control in particular, and the value of massed artillery in mitigating this and other limitations.<sup>70</sup> Dmitry Adamsky has compared this Russian tendency at the operational level with that of Israeli forces of “learning by friction”.<sup>71</sup>

### ***The Special Operation – the Second Phase***

In the light of failures on the Kyiv axis in particular, Russian forces withdrew from the occupied areas north and east of Kyiv in order to focus their efforts on the Donbass region and territory north of Crimea – the former being for what Russia had ostensibly gone to war to protect in the first place. Territory immediately north of Crimea has significance not only for the protection of Crimea itself but also for safeguarding its water supply.<sup>72</sup> Having regrouped and got their logistics in better order, Russian forces intensified offensive operations on the southern and eastern axes and resorted to a more methodical firepower-based approach to gaining ground.<sup>73</sup> By mid-May, both sides acknowledged that after a long and bloody struggle for the city of Mariupol in the south Russian forces from Crimea and those from the east had secured the land bridge between the two groupings of Russian forces in the south. Russian

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<sup>69</sup> See Alexander Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, pp. 255, 417, 458, 524, 542 for examples.

<sup>70</sup> See Mark Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994-2009* (Barnsley: Osprey Publishing, 2014), pp. 35-28.

<sup>71</sup> Dmitry Adamsky, “Russian campaign in Syria – change and continuity in strategic culture,” p. 114.

<sup>72</sup> [Russia has achieved at least 1 of its war goals: return Ukraine's water to Crimea : NPR](#), 13 June 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>73</sup> [Россия поменяла тактику на Украине: почему снизились военные потери - МК \(mk.ru\)](#), 3 June 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].



forces subsequently went over to the defensive along the southern part of the Dnepr and focused their efforts on the *liberation* of the separatist regions over which Ukrainian and separatist forces had been fighting since 2014.<sup>74</sup> The capture of Severodonetsk in late June and Lisichansk in early July highlighted that Russia's grinding advance in the east was making slow but steady gains as Russian forces abandoned nearly all pretenses of a war of manoeuvre and adopted an artillery-focused strategy that played not only to Russian strengths but accentuated relative Ukrainian weaknesses at the time.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it is interesting to note when looking back at the war in the Donbass in 2014-15 that initial attempts at manoeuvre were soon dropped and replaced by a much more artillery-orientated approach.<sup>76</sup>

As the summer progressed, however, even the grinding Russian advance of the early summer started to stall, thanks to a large extent to an increasingly well-equipped and motivated Ukrainian military that has been provided with the necessary weapons to counter Russian superiority in key areas of Russian strength. Western-supplied artillery, drones and rocket systems have gone some way to addressing the firepower imbalance between Russian and Ukrainian forces. Symbolic of new capabilities for the Ukrainian army has recently been the HIMARS rocket system, which has allowed Ukrainian forces to strike deep into the Russian rear.<sup>77</sup> The fact that much of Russia's artillery is towed makes it particularly vulnerable to effective counterbattery fire – something that was evident even back in 2015.<sup>78</sup> Western support for Ukraine (beyond that already provided after 2014<sup>79</sup>) was not however sufficiently timely in its arrival and deployment to prevent Russian forces from bludgeoning their way forward Donbass during the early summer.

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<sup>74</sup> [Владлен Татарский: падение Мариуполя – стратегическое поражение Украины \(ria.ru\)](#), 26 May 2022 [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>75</sup> [Войска РФ и ЛНР взяли под контроль Северодонецк - Новости – Мир – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 25 June 2022 and [Зеленский подтвердил отвод украинских войск от Лисичанска - Новости – Мир – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 4 July 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>76</sup> See for example Mikhail Polikarpov, *Donbass. Piat' let srazhenii i pobed...*, p. 379.

<sup>77</sup> [Ukraine: What are Himars missiles and are they changing the war? - BBC News](#), 30 August 2022 and [Украина подтвердила удар РСЗО HIMARS по Луганску - Новости – Мир – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 13 July 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>78</sup> [«Мста-Б»: не пора ли на свалку истории? \(topwar.ru\)](#), 1 September 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>79</sup> See for example [U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine \(congress.gov\)](#) for some idea of scale [Accessed 11 November 2022].

In the context of Russia's revised approach to the fighting in the Donbass, Ukrainian forces were not able to employ the successful hit-and-run tactics employed on the Kyiv axis, but instead were defending increasingly untenable defensive positions against superior Russian firepower.<sup>80</sup> More recently, however, the tenability of such positions in has increased with Western provision of weapons such as MLRS systems - including the HIMARS system mentioned above - and conventional artillery. Nonetheless, reports from the Ukrainian frontline suggest that much of the Western equipment that has been shipped to Ukraine is not necessarily getting through to frontline troops in a timely manner.<sup>81</sup> Whether speculation in Russian sources that some of the equipment being supplied by the West is likely to end up being exported as part of Ukraine's lucrative arms trade has any foundation remains to be seen, although there is evidence that some of those supposedly Ukrainian sources selling Western-supplied weapons on the *dark web* are being run by Russians.<sup>82</sup>

As the summer of 2022 progressed the Ukrainian side subsequently made numerous claims about going over to the offensive on the southern part of the front in order to recapture not only territory lost since February but also the Crimea.<sup>83</sup> The Ukrainian government would subsequently claim that these operations were an elaborate feint to draw Russian forces away from the northern sector of the front<sup>84</sup> - where in September Ukrainian forces were able to recapture significant territory in an offensive operation that clearly caught Russian forces off guard and saw them pushed all the way back to the border of the separatist regions.<sup>85</sup> While a major morale boost to

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<sup>80</sup> See for example [Ukraine artillery war on the eastern frontlines - The Washington Post](#), 3 June 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>81</sup> [A Frontline Shadow Economy: Ukrainian Units Swap Tanks and Artillery - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#), 30 August 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>82</sup> [Обычная история: как украинские Javelin оказались в Сирии \(topwar.ru\)](#), 6 June 2022 but see [Undercover with Russia's fake arms dealers - BBC News](#), 24 September 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>83</sup> See for example [Ukraine reportedly begins advancing to liberate country's south \(kyivindependent.com\)](#), 29 August 2022 and [Ukrainian counter-offensive in the Kherson - Kyiv Post](#), 29 August 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>84</sup> [Ukraine's southern offensive 'was designed to trick Russia' | Ukraine | The Guardian](#), 10 September 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>85</sup> See for example [Kharkiv offensive: Ukrainian army says it has tripled retaken area - BBC News](#), 11 September 2022 and [Ukraine war: What will Russia's losses mean for Putin? - BBC News](#), 12 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

Ukrainian forces, these offensive operations provoked the sort of escalation of the Russian war effort that was arguably overdue – namely the callup of reservists and a change in the territorial status of occupied Ukrainian territory to allow for the deployment of conscripts that will be considered further below.

Despite Russia's mobilisation of reserves, the Ukrainian side has continued to enjoy both a quantitative and qualitative advantage into October and even early November – building on its successful counteroffensive in the Iziium region to go on to capture [Krasnii] Liman within the boundaries of the Russian-annexed Donetsk Region by early October.<sup>86</sup> In this instance, the Russian newspaper *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* was unusually frank about some of the problems hampering the Russian defence – problems that went beyond the simple question of boots on the ground.<sup>87</sup> Indeed the recent Russian evacuation from those parts of the Kherson region on the western bank of the Dnepr can be seen as acknowledgement that it will take some time for those reservists called up in September to have a dramatic impact on the frontline.<sup>88</sup>

### Losses and Their Replacement

As the war has dragged on into months rather than weeks, both sides in the war have had to seek additional manpower to augment those forces they started with in the face of heavy losses. The Ukrainian government – like that of Russia – has so far been successful at suppressing information about the true scale of losses in the war to date. At one point during the defensive phase of Ukrainian operations in the Donbass the Ukrainian government admitted to 200 troops killed per day – an unsustainable

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<sup>86</sup> See [Минобороны сообщило об отводе войск из Красного Лимана - Новости – Мир – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 1 October 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>87</sup> [Красный Лиман, последние новости о ситуации на 2 октября 2022 года - KP.RU](#), 2 October 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>88</sup> [Российские войска уходят из Херсона – Газета Коммерсантъ № 208 \(7409\) от 10.11.2022 \(kommersant.ru\)](#) [Accessed 11 November 2022].

number.<sup>89</sup> Although this number was soon reported to have dropped, that was before Ukraine started offensive operations both in the south and north.<sup>90</sup>

In replacing losses and increasing the size of its armed forces, Ukraine seems to have been able to capitalise on a groundswell of popular enthusiasm for defending Ukrainian territory from Russian forces, claiming to have had a force 700,000 strong by late May.<sup>91</sup> That this force was very much nominal is apparent from events on the ground – clearly many of the 700,000 reputed to be available had still not received adequate training and equipment for operations at that time.

Russian forces too have certainly taken significant casualties during the war to date, with casualty rates having been particularly intense during the early phases of the operation. As of mid-September 2022 the Russian government was reporting that just under 6,000 Russian soldiers had been killed to date – a figure excluding losses for the DPR and LPR.<sup>92</sup> The Donetsk People’s Republic confirmed the deaths of 3,423 service personnel since the start of the *special operation* as of 21 October 2022, and one can assume significant albeit probably lower losses for the armed forces of the smaller LNR.<sup>93</sup> The Russian armed forces as a whole had a *de facto* nominal uniformed strength of somewhere around 800,000 before the recent call-up of reservists - where at the start of the *special operation* the *de jure* uniformed strength of the Russian armed forces had been set at just over 1,000,000 personnel back in 2017.<sup>94</sup> With up to around a third of those troops having been conscripts who were legally not supposed to be deployed outside Russia the pool of troops theoretically available for operations in Ukraine was

<sup>89</sup> [Ukrainian casualties: Kyiv losing up to 200 troops a day - Zelensky aide - BBC News](#), 9 June 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>90</sup> [Ukraine’s losses have fallen to 30 dead per day – Zelenskyy | Ukrainska Pravda](#), 22 July 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>91</sup> [Zelenskyy: 700,000 soldiers are defending Ukraine today | Ukrayinska Pravda](#), 21 May 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>92</sup> [Russia calls up 300,000 reservists, says 6,000 soldiers killed in Ukraine | Reuters](#), 21 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>93</sup> [Потери войск ДНР с начала спецоперации превысили 3,4 тысячи человек убитыми - телеканала «Красная Линия» \(rline.tv\)](#), 21 October 2022 [Accessed 8 November 2022].

<sup>94</sup> [Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 17.11.2017 г. № 555 • Президент России \(kremlin.ru\)](#). On changes in the strength of the Russian armed forces since the collapse of the Soviet Union, see [Как менялась штатная численность Вооруженных сил России - ТАСС \(tass.ru\)](#), 25 August 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].



September that saw the recapture of significant territory around Iziium saw Russian forces in the area heavily outnumbered.<sup>101</sup> In order to stabilise the situation, it was clear to many Russian and non-Russian observers that fairly significant measures were required to give Russian forces the strength to be able to defend territory. Belatedly Vladimir Putin authorised such measures in late September with the call up of what as of early November was reported to be 318,000 reservists – the impact of which will be felt over forthcoming months and heralds the nominal beginning of a new phase in the war.<sup>102</sup>

As of 1 November, the Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu reported that 87,000 of those mobilised had been sent to the zone of military operations. Vladimir Putin added that of those sent to the zone of operations, about 50,000 had seen action.<sup>103</sup> While significant numbers of Russian males have apparently sought to avoid this call-up through flight abroad, the numbers involved do not suggest that the process as a whole is being undermined to the point that the call-up will not have very significant impact on Russian frontline strength in the coming months.<sup>104</sup> Initial hiccups in the call-up process – such as the call-up of those clearly not fit for service - have been ironed out as the process progressed. Historically many such mobilisations have been beset with teething troubles.<sup>105</sup>

As significant as the call-up of reservists is the fact that in late September Russia also organised referendums on the occupied territories in Ukraine on whether their

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<sup>101</sup> See [Ukraine war: Russians 'outnumbered 8-1' in counter-attack - BBC News](#), 12 September 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>102</sup> See [Путин: в России мобилизовали 318 тысяч человек - Новости – Общество – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 4 November 2022 and [Минобороны разъяснило порядок частичной мобилизации - Новости – Общество – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 22 September 2022, - and [Telegram: Contact @mod\\_russia](#), 22 September 2022. For a photo gallery of pictures relating to this mobilisation, see [Частичная мобилизация – Картина дня – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 26 September 2022 [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/56459>Шойгу: 87 тыс. мобилизованных направлены на фронт - [Новости – Общество – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 1 November 2022 [Accessed 6 November 2022] and [Путин сообщил об участии 50 тыс. мобилизованных в боевых действиях - Новости – Политика – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 7 November 2022 [Accessed 8 November 2022]

<sup>104</sup> [Sources: FSB reports 260,000 men left Russia, wants to close borders \(novayagazeta.eu\)](#), 26 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>105</sup> [Putin says mistakes of military mobilisation should be corrected | Reuters](#), 29 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

populations wanted to join the Russian Federation. Referendums are apparently also intended for those parts of regions yet to be fully brought under Russian control - such as about a quarter of the Zaporozhskaia region – although whether this region will ever be entirely under Russian control is questionable.<sup>106</sup>

The incorporation of the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics – and the Zaporozhskaia and Kherson regions – into the Russian Federation was perhaps late in coming in the sense that the incorporation of these territories into the Russian Federation means that Russian conscripts – after their initial training – are available for deployment in the region for more than half of their conscription period. Although in principle Russian law allows for the deployment of conscripts outside the Russian Federation, it only does where:

Military personnel serving as a result of conscription may be sent (including as part of formations and units) for the carrying out of tasks in circumstances in which there is armed conflict (for participation in combat) after they have passed through no fewer than four months of their military service and after training for their recorded military specializations [подготовки по военно-учетным специальностям].<sup>107</sup>

The deployment of conscripts is something that the Putin government had clearly sought to avoid – fearing the backlash that significant losses amongst this group might have had on Russian public opinion of the war. Hence, at the beginning of the war, the Russian government made it clear that conscripts would not be sent to Ukraine.<sup>108</sup> Those who ended up in Ukraine were apparently not supposed to be there, and those responsible consequently punished.<sup>109</sup> In late October, the Russian government re-asserted its claim that those subject to recent call-up for first-time service in the Russian armed forces would not be sent to defend the Donetsk, Luhansk,

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<sup>106</sup> [Рогов анонсировал референдум после взятия всех территорий Запорожья - Новости - Мир - Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 28 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>107</sup> See [Статья 2. Прохождение военной службы \ КонсультантПлюс \(consultant.ru\)](#) [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>108</sup> See [Russia drafts 134,500 conscripts but says they won't go to Ukraine | Reuters](#), 31 March 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>109</sup> [Russia punishes officers after conscripts were sent to Ukraine, prosecutor says | Reuters](#), 7 June 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions.<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, recent conscripts can of course be used to defend other borders – including that with Ukraine in the Belgorod region for example. If the conscription period is extended to two years – as was previously the case and has recently been mooted – then that will further improve Russia’s manpower situation as long as Russia is able to supply and equip a larger force.<sup>111</sup>

### **The Morale Factor**

The wider morale and public opinion dimensions of the war are crucial if either side is to see the war through to some sort of conclusion in which it can claim a meaningful victory. It is perhaps important to include the West, especially NATO members, in this assessment, since their support is crucial to a sustained Ukrainian war effort. While the scale of the military support being provided by European NATO members is likely to decline as the war drags on due to problems in replacing equipment provided to Ukraine, European nations can still continue to provide economic assistance.<sup>112</sup> US and UK commitments to provide for Ukrainian needs as long as is necessary are likely to be more sustained, although in the US case elements within the Republican Party have expressed their disquiet at providing Ukraine with a blank cheque for aid.<sup>113</sup>

Despite heavy losses on both sides, both Russian and Ukrainian morale and public opinion seem to have been sustained to date. In both cases, the apparent existential nature of the war is likely a factor in maintaining public commitments. Whereas on the Ukrainian side the war is being presented as a struggle to maintain Ukrainian statehood, on the Russian side the war is increasingly being portrayed as a war for the preservation of the *Russian world* – and more recently in defence of Russian

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<sup>110</sup> [Генштаб РФ пообещал не отправлять срочников в новые регионы и зону военной операции - Новости – Политика – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 31 October 2022 [Accessed 6 November 2022]

<sup>111</sup> On problems with clothing and basic equipment during the recent mobilisation of reservists, see [С ВИДОМ ИСПРАВНОЙ АМУНИЦИИ – Газета Коммерсантъ № 201 \(7402\) от 28.10.2022 \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 28 October 2022 [Accessed 6 November 2022].

<sup>112</sup> [EU countries are running out of weapons, says Borrell – POLITICO](#), 5 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>113</sup> See for example [“McCarthy: No 'blank check' for Ukraine if GOP wins majority,” | AP News](#), 18 October 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].



territory. Ukrainian attacks on the Russian language in Ukraine are one thing which the Russian government can point to as evidence of oppression that required intervention.<sup>114</sup> For Ukraine, the war through into the summer was presented as a fight for Ukraine's very existence – even if there isn't evidence that Russian intent was to capture the entire country. Since then, Ukrainian anger at the Russian occupation and annexation seems to be sustaining a war effort that has had the lofty aim of recapturing all territory lost to Russia since 2014.<sup>115</sup> Whether higher Ukrainian morale can be sustained will no doubt depend on whether further offensive operations can continue to make territorial gains such as those made in the Iziium region in September and Kherson region in November.

While the Russian government has, like its Ukrainian counterpart, been largely successful in hiding the full human cost of its operations in Ukraine, there were signs early in the conflict that the high initial Russian losses – including amongst *elite* troops – were starting to register in Russia society.<sup>116</sup> Fortunately for the Russian government, casualty rates during offensive operations on the Kyiv axis and in the south were not sustained as Russia moved towards a more attritional strategy and a focus on the Donbass. There were also suggestions early in the war that the popularity of a fratricidal war against fellow Slavs might be very limited, but it quickly became apparent that was not going to be the case.<sup>117</sup> In that regard, it is probably Western actions that have made the greatest contribution towards allowing Putin's government to turn the war into a wider war being carried out to defend Russia from Western attempts to undermine it. Support for Vladimir Putin and his government's policies remains high regardless of the indicator – with the government continuing to retain

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<sup>114</sup> For a Russian view of these policies, see [The Russian language in post-Soviet Ukraine: 30 years of discrimination against the country's most popular tongue – RT Russia & Former Soviet Union](#), 10 June 2022. For a piece from an outlet typically sympathetic to Ukraine's position, see [Language Law For National Print Media Comes Into Force In Ukraine \(rferl.org\)](#), 16 January 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>115</sup> See for example [Ukraine Seeks Full Restoration of Territory, Including Crimea, Zelensky Says \(wsj.com\)](#), 3 May 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>116</sup> See for example [The heavy losses of an elite Russian regiment in Ukraine - BBC News](#), 2 April 2022 [Accessed 13 November 2022].

<sup>117</sup> See for example [Not just Putin: Most Russians support the war in Ukraine - Atlantic Council](#), 10 March 2022 and [«Специальная военная операция» на Украине: отношение россиян \(russianfield.com\)](#), March 2022 [Accessed 13 November 2022].

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majority support for the war. Older Russians are more likely to be supportive of the Russian government and the war, but there is still solid support for both in younger age brackets.<sup>118</sup>

That many upwardly mobile younger Russians – largely from urban areas - have left Russia may reduce the size of the pool of reservists and conscripts, but it does have the effect of removing potential opposition to the war from within Russia. While many have left in order to avoid conscription and mobilisation, some have also left as foreign companies pull their operations out of Russia into neighbouring countries, taking Russian staff with them.<sup>119</sup> The impact on Russian public opinion of the call-up of reservists and the ultimately inevitable deployment of conscripts to annexed regions of the Ukraine once they are part of the Russian Federation would undoubtedly be wholly negative if it wasn't for the fact that the government will now be able to claim that Russian forces are fighting to defend Russian territory.

The unprecedented nature of Western sanctions – exceeding anything applied against the Soviet Union during the Cold War – along with overt Western cheerleading and military and economic support for Ukraine - can certainly be presented as representing a *de facto* declaration of war by the West on Russia. That the war was started to a considerable extent because of perceptions that the West has been trampling over Russian security concerns and geopolitical sensibilities in Eastern Europe since the 1990s has allowed the Putin government to take a *we told you so* line about the hostility of Western liberalism towards an alternative Russian civilization. The annexation of Crimea was undoubtedly popular in Russia and Ukrainian claims to be seeking to

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<sup>118</sup> See for example [Одобрение институтов, рейтинги партий и политиков – Левада-Центр \(levada.ru\)](https://www.levada.ru), 28 September 2022 for assessments of broad public support for Vladimir Putin and his government over time from a large *independent* Russian polling organisation. See also Denis Volkhov and Andrei Kolesnikov, [My Country, Right or Wrong: Russian Public Opinion on Ukraine - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), 7 September 2022. On interpretation of polling numbers, see Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub, [Do Russians tell the truth when they say they support the war in Ukraine? Evidence from a list experiment | EUROPP \(lse.ac.uk\)](#), 6 April 2022 and Daniel Freeman, [How do regular Russians feel about the war in Ukraine? - Responsible Statecraft](#), 17 June 2022 [Accessed 13 November 2022].

<sup>119</sup> See [Factbox: Where have Russians been fleeing to since mobilisation began? | Reuters](#), 6 October 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022]. During a recent trip to Russia the author was made aware that a number of relatively young and degree-educated Russians whom he knows had moved to Kazakhstan along with the operations of their foreign employer.

recapture it can also only fuel Russian support for the war.<sup>120</sup> Whether the incorporation of all of the Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine into the Russian Federation will mean that their defence has quite the same propaganda value as that of Crimea remains to be seen. Certainly slogans such as *We don't abandon our own* [#СвоихНеБросаем] associated with the *special operation* seem likely to resonate.<sup>121</sup> Anecdotal evidence from a recent trip by the author to both Murmansk and Moscow seems to support evidence from opinion polls that Russian support for, or at worst acquiescence in, it is the norm. Indeed, more than one Russian with whom the author spoke likened the mobilisation of September 2022 to the awakening of a sleeping bear – and a more serious material, human and moral commitment to the war on the part of much of the Russian population.

While the Western press has published many articles on apparently low morale amongst Russian troops, the origin of most such reports has typically been the Ukrainian or Western governments and their agencies.<sup>122</sup> There is undoubtedly some truth to some of these claims during the initial phases of the war, even if some have been exaggerated for propaganda purposes. Although the Russian government has gone to significant lengths in recent years to improve the appeal of service in the armed forces – particularly for conscripts – it has faced an uphill struggle in replacing negative impressions of army life with something more positive. Particularly problematic is the ongoing problem of the *dedovshchina*.<sup>123</sup> While some improvements have certainly been made, the pace of change is slow.<sup>124</sup> Although there is evidence that the Russian population has started to look upon the armed forces more favourably as of late, the

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<sup>120</sup> [Poll: Majority Of Russians Support Crimea Annexation, But Worry About Economic Effects \(rferl.org\)](https://www.rferl.org)

<sup>121</sup> See for example [#СвоихНеБросаем \(onf.ru\)](https://onf.ru), [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>122</sup> [UK military intelligence: Multiple factors driving low morale among Russian forces in Ukraine | The Hill](https://thehill.com), 19 June 2022 [Accessed 13 November 2022].

<sup>123</sup> For a brief history of the *dedovshchina*, see [Dedovshchina – Russiapedia Of Russian origin \(rt.com\)](https://rt.com). See also Iva Savic, “The Russian Soldier Today,” *The Journal of International Affairs* 63, 2 (2010): pp. 219-229 and Jason P. Gresh, “The Realities of Russian Military Conscription,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24, 2 (2011): pp. 185-216 on the issues as they stood more than a decade ago. On the ongoing problem of the *dedovshchina*, see [More Than a Decade After Military Reform, Hazing Still Plagues the Russian Army - The Moscow Times](https://www.themoscowtimes.com), 18 February 2022 [Accessed 13 November 2022].

<sup>124</sup> For an upbeat Russian-language piece on the reform process that pays significant attention to the issue of quality of life for service personnel, see [Национальная оборона / Главная тема / Реформа Сердюкова – Макарова \(oborona.ru\)](https://oborona.ru), 11 November 2020 [Accessed 13 November 2022]. See also Mark Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016*, pp. 44-5.

armed forces have had decades of decay to overcome.<sup>125</sup> That morale amongst Russian troops has been an issue recently is certainly suggested by attempts by the Russian ministry of defence to provide incentives for good battlefield performance. For example, in early September there were reports in the Russian press that the Ministry of Defence was seeking to provide those excelling in Ukraine with plots of land both in the region and elsewhere in Russia, including in the Moscow region.<sup>126</sup> Whether the Russian bureaucratic machinery is able to process and deliver on the many bonuses and rewards being offered in the war in a timely manner is another matter. On 2 November 2022, President Putin signed a presidential decree ordering the payment of 195,000 Rubles to those signing a contract for service in the Russian armed forces for more than a year as part of recent mobilisation efforts – clearing up confusion as to just what those signing up could expect to receive as a signing bonus.<sup>127</sup> Additionally though, during the recent callup of reservists shortages of equipment and high prices for those items of equipment that reservists were expected to purchase for themselves provoked something of a media storm, resulting in the government attempting not only to increase production of key items of equipment but also to limit speculation on the part of equipment vendors seeking to profit from the war.<sup>128</sup> Once again, such issues stem in part from the Russian government's failure to take Ukrainian opposition seriously enough and the *gung ho* – or more specifically *да ладно* – approach to the war that has dominated its first months.

In the West – only indirectly involved in the war – support for the Ukrainian war effort in the main remains significant. It seems that Europe has in the main managed to purchase sufficient gas – particularly LNG – to prevent a major heating crisis this

<sup>125</sup> [ВЦИОМ: россияне почувствовали военную угрозу и стали лучше относиться к армии - Новости – Политика – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 26 December 2018 [Accessed 13 November 2022].

<sup>126</sup> [Минобороны предложило выдавать отличившимся в ходе спецоперации земли в Подмоскowie и Крыму - Новости – Общество – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 2 September 2022 [Accessed 13 November 2022].

<sup>127</sup> See [Путин подписал указ о выплате мобилизованным по 195 тыс. рублей - Новости – Политика – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 3 November 2022 and specifically <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211030044?index=0&rangeSize=1> [Accessed 6 November 2022]

<sup>128</sup> See for example [Продажи бронезилов и армейских ботинок на маркетплейсах выросли в 2,5 раза в первую неделю после объявления частичной мобилизации - Российская газета \(rg.ru\)](#), 9 October 2022 and [Жесткие меры для спекулянтов на мобилизованные товары - заявление генпрокурора Краснова \(ura.news\)](#), 12 October 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

winter, albeit at the expense of less wealthy economies.<sup>129</sup> However, high prices for energy are one factor likely to sap European commitment to the Ukrainian cause. Inflation is also high in Russia, but there is some evidence that salaries are keeping pace with prices better in Russia than in the West, and, as one Russian said to the author after a discussion of inflation in Russia, “We know why we have to suffer inflation, but do you [in the West]?”<sup>130</sup>

Given Canada’s large Ukrainian minority, it is unsurprising that support for Ukraine is particularly high there.<sup>131</sup> In Europe however, even during the summer of 2022 there have been signs of cracks in the Western alliance, with Hungary to a large extent choosing to opt out of the sanctions regime,<sup>132</sup> and the Czech Republic seeing large demonstrations against the ramifications of EU support for Ukraine – including in particular the effect of sanctions on fuel prices.<sup>133</sup> Serbia too has not been willing to tow the wider European line on sanctions towards Russia, although it has stopped short of willingness to recognise the incorporation of Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation.<sup>134</sup> In the US, support for Ukraine is ostensibly high,<sup>135</sup> but is arguably hampered by a relative lack of US popular interest in a war without the same acute ramifications for the US consumer as in Europe. Indeed, in a recent Gallup poll in the US, “only 1% of Americans mention the situation with Russia as the major problem facing the U.S. Mentions of the Ukraine situation were at 9% in March, after Russia's

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<sup>129</sup> See [EU Energy Crisis Sparked by Ukraine War to Create Blackouts in Poor Countries - Bloomberg](#), 7 November 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>130</sup> See for example [Russia raises pension and minimum wage as inflation hits economy | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#), 25 May 2022 and [Russian state companies hike salaries amid double-digit inflation | Reuters](#), 1 July 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>131</sup> See for example [Most Canadians support increasing aid to Ukraine: survey | CTV News](#), 11 November 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>132</sup> [Hungary PM Orban says EU sanctions on Russia have "backfired" | Reuters](#), 26 September 2022 and [Hungary cannot support any new EU energy sanctions against Russia - govt | Reuters](#), 29 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>133</sup> [Czechs protest handling of energy crisis, membership of EU and NATO | Reuters](#), 28 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>134</sup> [Last Friend in Europe: How Far Will Russia Go to Preserve Its Alliance With Serbia? - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), 10 June 2022 and [Serbia won't recognise results of Russia's referendums in Ukraine - Vucic | Reuters](#), 28 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>135</sup> See for example [Americans Back Ukrainian Goal of Reclaiming Territory \(gallup.com\)](#), 15 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24.”<sup>136</sup> Indeed, recent polling suggests that many Americans would like to see their government putting more effort into encouraging a negotiated settlement in the war – even if Ukraine has to give up territory to achieve that end.<sup>137</sup> Nonetheless, relative disinterest or a desire to see a negotiated settlement is not the same as opposition – and the US government currently at least remains essentially free to escalate commitments to the war in Ukraine without domestic political hindrance.

### **Likely Outcomes and *Victory***

The war in Ukraine has now entered a third phase in which Russia is finally starting to mobilise her considerable latent strength for what is clearly now a war rather than merely a *special operation*.

The Western press has tended to be very volatile in its predictions regarding the outcome of Vladimir Putin’s Russia’s *special operation* in Ukraine – flitting from euphoria at every Russian setback to gloomy predictions if Russia has gained ground. In many ways much of the Western press has followed Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky’s rather erratic pronouncements – with Zelensky’s claims ranging from the suggestion that Ukraine will fight until all formerly Ukrainian territory is back in Ukrainian hands (including Crimea) to pleas for more support from the West on the grounds that without ever increasing Western military support Ukraine will lose its war with Russia.<sup>138</sup> At the time at which this article was being submitted for publication there is considerable euphoria in the Western press at the Russian abandonment of territory of the Kherson region west of the Dnepr. The New York Times went as far as claiming that “The Russian pullback from the expanse of farmland on the western bank

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<sup>136</sup> [Abortion Moves Up on "Most Important Problem" List \(gallup.com\)](#), 1 August 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>137</sup> [dfp quincy institute ukraine toplines.pdf \(filesforprogress.org\)](#) [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>138</sup> Examples of Zelensky’s shifting position include [Zelensky says Ukraine prepared to discuss neutrality in peace talks - BBC News](#), 28 March 2022 through to [Zelenskyy vows Ukraine will win as Russia redoubles effort | AP News](#), 22 September 2022 and [Zelensky won't negotiate with Putin \(pravda.ru\)](#), 30 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022]. The US government has recently apparently suggested that the Ukraine drop the idea that it won’t negotiate with Putin in order that Ukraine be seen to be holding some sort of moral high ground. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/11/05/ukraine-russia-peace-negotiations/>, 5 November 2022 [Accessed 6 November 2022].

of the Dnipro River comes as a pivot point in the war.”<sup>139</sup> Both the Russian defeat on the approaches to Kyiv and Ukrainian recapture of territory east of Kharkiv have been similarly lauded. Such defeats do indeed represent blows to the Russian war effort, but the result of all of them has been to simplify the Russian defence and logistics, and ultimately strengthen Russian forces in their aftermaths. After defeats on the approaches to Kyiv Russian forces were able to significantly consolidate their operations in the Donbass and make significant gains. The consolidation that is currently taking place in the aftermath of retreats east of Kharkiv and in Kherson is also likely to strengthen the Russian position elsewhere and may ultimately may contribute to further Russian gains in the all important Donbass region, and in particular in the DPR.

Although US intelligence on the probability of a Russian attack on Ukraine proved to be accurate – and was passed on to the Ukrainian government and widely publicised in the press - subsequently Western political leaders and analysts have not helped ground Ukrainian decision-making in realistic assessment of the situation. Western political leaders have collectively failed to provide sober analysis of the situation on the ground and reasonable assessments of what might constitute Ukrainian success or *winning* in the ongoing war. Even at the end of June, as Russian forces were grinding forward, British Minister of Defence Ben Wallace was suggesting that “the Ukrainians are winning” on the grounds of the toll their defence had been exacting on Russian forces – adding that he thought that Russia had lost 25,000 killed in the war to date – therefore implying that exacting those sort of casualties would have constituted “winning.”<sup>140</sup>

Many Western governments – and in particular those in the US and UK – have proven keen to escalate their commitments to the Ukrainian cause, and their growing commitment of increasingly sophisticated and varied weapons systems to the Ukrainian arsenal will certainly increase Ukrainian offensive potential. Russia does, however, have the capacity to match such increased potential with quantity even if not material quality for the foreseeable future. In addition to the recent call-up of reservists

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<sup>139</sup> [Ukraine Moves Forward in South, With Little Resistance From Russia - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/10/world/europe/ukraine-south-russia.html), 10 November 2022 [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>140</sup> [Defence Secretary Ben Wallace tells LBC: 'I'd have been fired by now if I'd led an... - LBC](https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/uk/2022/06/29/defence-secretary-ben-wallace-tells-lbc-i-d-have-been-fired-by-now-if-i-d-led-an-ukraine.html), 29 June 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

promising to greatly strengthen Russian forces, weapons such as the Tochka-U missile system, that have been declared obsolete and previously withdrawn, have continued to be stockpiled and are now being drawn upon, and in many cases still have some value. The appearance of Russian T-62Ms on the battlefield in Ukraine highlights the Russian propensity for saving older equipment for a rainy day – in line with the cultural propensity for older Russians to horde many items in apartments and dachas. Despite claims that the Russian armed forces were disposing of large quantities of equipment during the past decade, Russian stockpiles are still likely to be sizeable.<sup>141</sup> Stockpiled equipment certainly suffers from issues relating to deterioration over time – a particular problem for ordnance.<sup>142</sup> Nonetheless, Russian stockpiles remain an asset in a war that below the headline use of high-technology systems has descended into a war in which tanks, infantry and artillery are engaged in a manner not vastly dissimilar from the Second World War –or even the First.

The recent incorporation of occupied territory into the Russian Federation means that in order to claim at least partial success, Russian forces will have to hold onto all or at least the bulk of that territory – preferably capturing those parts of these territories not currently under Russian control. It is particularly important from a political standpoint that Russian forces capture the remainder of the DPR. Clearly anything less than this will undermine any claims of a resounding *victory*. It has however to be noted that the exact borders for the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions recently incorporated into the Russian Federation have yet to be established, giving the Russian side some latitude. Territory of the Kherson region on the western side of the Dnepr recently abandoned by Russian forces is – given the geography involved – unlikely to be recaptured by Russian forces and certainly represents a blow to the sort of *victory* that Putin might be able to ultimately claim. The *liberation* of the remainder of the Donetsk region by Russian forces would however go some way to compensate for the likely failure to secure territory on the western bank of the Dnepr in the south. At best however, Putin will likely only be able to claim a partial *victory* in terms of territory.

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<sup>141</sup> On the removal of equipment, see for example [Около 50 тысяч танков, БМП и БТР утилизируют в РФ до 2020 года — Военный информатор \(military-informant.com\)](#) and [NEWSru.com :: Россия за пять лет должна утилизировать 42 тысячи вагонов устаревшего вооружения](#), 6 December 2017 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>142</sup> A problem during the war in the Donbass even prior to the *special operation*. See Mikhail Polikarpov, *Donbass. Piat' let srazhenii i pobed*, p. 381.



While the prospects for Russian forces to make further gains are bleak in the short-medium term, the prospects for Ukrainian forces to recapture significant territory are in the short term at least slightly better, but only until the weight of the Russian call-up of reservists can be felt. Indeed, the recent Russian announcement of the abandonment of territory of the Kherson region on the west bank of the Dnepr River is a stark acknowledgement of short-term frontline realities.<sup>143</sup>

The window of opportunity for Ukrainian forces is however rapidly closing. Increased Ukrainian capabilities courtesy of the West have been and are likely to continue to be met with further Russian escalation. As more than one Russian commented to the author during his recent visit to Murmansk and Moscow in Russia, the *Russian bear* is only now waking up to the realities of the war and has considerably more potential to bring into the war than is currently being expended. That Russian defeats can be attributed to the fact that Russia is in essence fighting a proxy war with NATO goes some way to justifying failures to date and the need for increased Russian commitments to what increasingly will have to be portrayed as a war rather than simply a *special operation*. Russia undoubtedly has far more latent military potential than Ukraine, where the latter's potential is highly dependent on Western support.

While the Western commitment to the escalation of support for Ukraine seems solid at the time of writing, a winter of energy-related turmoil could start to push European governments away from current levels of support for Ukraine both in terms of sanctions on Russia and economic and military assistance. The US is however clearly moving towards a long-term procurement strategy for the Ukrainian armed forces that involves the Ukrainian forces acquiring equipment directly from new production rather than existing US stocks.<sup>144</sup>

Even if Russia retains control over only part of the territory recently incorporated into the Russian Federation a partial denazification of Ukraine could be claimed, and in particular an ejection of right-wing orientated Ukrainian units such as the infamous Azov Battalion from the Donbass region. If the fighting ends with a ceasefire rather

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<sup>143</sup> Южный фронт: «Решение об обороне на левом берегу Днепра непростое» — Одна Родина ([odnarodyna.org](http://odnarodyna.org)), 9 November 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>144</sup> [Latest U.S. Military Package for Ukraine Suggests Shift in Focus to Long, Open-Ended War - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com), 28 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

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than a peace treaty – where the former is far more likely – the chances of Ukraine being able to join NATO are slim given the scope for a resumption of hostilities to drag NATO into a shooting war with Russia. As such, Putin’s government may also be able to claim that the *special operation* has in the short-medium term at least stopped NATO expansion into Ukraine.

During future escalation in the war – short of the unlikely possibility of a meaningfully different government in Russia - public opinion in Ukraine could feasibly shift in the direction of seeking a negotiated settlement involving acceptance of a loss of territory, but this is unlikely to be a rapid process. Russia has made it plain on numerous occasions since the beginning of the war that it is open to negotiation – even if the terms of such negotiation may be unacceptable to the current Ukrainian leadership.<sup>145</sup> Russian public opinion too could turn against the war, but as the war can and has been increasingly portrayed as war not only with Ukraine but also with a West keen to destroy Russian *civilization*, the stakes on the Russian side have increased significantly.<sup>146</sup> Outliers in terms of possibility include greater involvement for China in supporting Russia’s war effort – in part to act against the possibility of increased US hegemony and the undermining of its own claims to Taiwan. Such an eventually would bring the prospects of a wider war much closer. Even more of an outlier, although still possible, is that NATO is dragged into a more active role in the war – perhaps as a result of some sort of Ukrainian attempt to portray Russian aggression against NATO territory as in the recent case of what seems actually to have been, at the time this article was submitted, a Ukrainian air defence missile falling on Polish territory, killing two. As the New York Times went on to note, “Neither Russia nor NATO wants to go to war with the other. Both sides have shown considerable restraint in trying to avoid direct confrontation and keep the war from spilling over outside Ukraine.”<sup>147</sup>

If the West does go much further in providing Ukraine with the means to conduct successful offensive operations or to strike deep into Russian territory – or in

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<sup>145</sup> See for example [‘Much softer’: Is Russia eyeing a way out of the Ukraine war? | Russia-Ukraine war News | Al Jazeera](#), 21 October 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].

<sup>146</sup> See for example Maria Lipman, [How Russia has come to loathe the West – European Council on Foreign Relations \(ecfr.eu\)](#), 13 March 2015 [Accessed 13 November 2022] and Richard Sakwa and Andrej Krickovic, “War in Ukraine: The Clash of Norms and Ontologies,” in this special issue of JMSS.

<sup>147</sup> [NATO and Poland Say Missile Strike Was Likely Unintentional: Russia-Ukraine War Live Updates - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#), 16 November 2022 [Accessed 16 November 2022].

the unlikely event that Western forces are committed directly - then the sort of threats regarding the use of nuclear weapons coming out of Moscow will start to have a credibility that they have previously lacked. The Russian government has previously made it clear that the use of nuclear weapons is only likely to be considered in the event of some sort of existential threat to the Russian Federation.<sup>148</sup> The threat of the loss of Crimea would probably constitute such a situation – as would the prospect of losing all or most of that territory currently controlled in the other recently annexed regions. While we are a very long way from such an unlikely scenario – with the chances of Russia losing much of the territory its currently holds being low and Vladimir Putin having stressed that Russia has no intention of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine<sup>149</sup> - the threat of the first use of nuclear weapons since the US dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 is still probably more real than at any subsequent point since the early 1980s. One can only hope that Ramzan Kadyrov's suggestion that Russian use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine continues to fall on deaf ears.<sup>150</sup>

Even if, ultimately, Russia is likely to be able to claim some sort of *victory*, this victory will have come at a very heavy price for Putin's Russia. The damage done to the Russian economy by the war itself and Western economic sanctions is undoubtedly significant, but a large resource-rich country like Russia is in a relatively strong position to continue to weather the economic storm. Economically the Russian government had prepared what might be described as a *war chest* for the war, and the number of countries unwilling to join the Western sanctions regime against Russia is very

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<sup>148</sup> See [Is Russia increasingly likely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine? \(theconversation.com\)](https://www.theconversation.com/news/164444), 9 May 2022 and more recently [Analysis: Truth or bluff? Why Putin's nuclear warnings have the West worried | Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/analysis-truth-or-bluff-why-putin-nuclear-warnings-have-the-west-worried-2022-09-28/), 28 September 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022]. Putin's speech of 30 September 2022 on the incorporation of four regions from Ukraine into the Russian Federation does not change the positioning of this apparent red line, but does of course shift the line in expanding that territory that constitutes Russia in the Russian government's understanding. See also [МИД России выпустил заявление о предотвращении ядерной войны - Новости – Мир – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5444444), 2 November 2022 [Accessed 6 November 2022]. On Russia's tactical nuclear capabilities, see <https://topwar.ru/202412-takticheskoe-jadernoe-oruzhie-rossii.html>, 27 September 2022 [Accessed 27 September 2022].

<sup>149</sup> [Russia's Putin rules out using nuclear weapons in Ukraine - POLITICO](https://www.politico.com/news/2022/10/27/putin-nuclear-ukraine/), 27 October 2022 [Accessed 16 November 2022].

<sup>150</sup> [Кадиров призвал использовать на Украине маломощное ядерное оружие - Новости – Политика – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5444444), 1 October 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

significant.<sup>151</sup> During a recent trip by the author to Russia, it became quite apparent that Western sanctions are not having the desired effect on the Russian economy. A bumper harvest in Russia for 2022<sup>152</sup> and considerable efforts towards autarky, combined with a willingness by many of Russia's non-Western partners to continue to trade freely with Russia mean that Russian shops remain full of food and other goods – including Western brands.<sup>153</sup> When combined with the increase in oil and gas prices fueled in part by Western European refusals to purchase Russian oil (and to try to ween themselves off Russian gas) these factors contribute to a situation where the Russian economy is proving far more resilient than the doom and gloom predicted by many Western analysts and commentators.

Going hand-in-hand with Russia's ability to maintain trading relationships with the likes of China and India – guaranteeing markets for her oil and gas products in the context of high prices – is the fact that Western powers have failed to politically isolate Russia more broadly on the world stage. China has been reticent to comment on Russia's war in Ukraine and has in fact opted to highlight its independence of action.<sup>154</sup> Nowhere is this more noticeable in rhetoric surrounding Chinese claims on Taiwan. Not only China but also India and other BRICS nations have decided that relations with Russia are more important than the potential consequences of Western threats against them for non-compliance in sanctions against Russia.<sup>155</sup> Western policy, by putting such countries in a position to have to make a choice, has all too frequently compelled them to make choices that highlight that they are not at the mercy of the West and can maintain a neutrality in the war that allows them to continue to trade with both Russia and the West.

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<sup>151</sup> [Chart: Russia's Growing Reserves 'War Chest' | Statista](#), 28 February 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022]. Some idea of the limits to the numbers of countries sanctioning Russia can be gleaned from [Tracking sanctions against Russia \(reuters.com\)](#), 7 July 2022 [Accessed 12 November 2022].

<sup>152</sup> [Мишустин: Россия достигла рекордного урожая зерна – 150 млн тонн - Новости – Потребительский рынок – Коммерсантъ \(kommersant.ru\)](#), 2 November 2022 [Accessed 6 November 2022].

<sup>153</sup> As observed by the author in both Murmansk and Moscow during a recent three-week visit to Russia.

<sup>154</sup> See for example [At G-20, China objects to calling Russia's invasion of Ukraine a 'war' - The Washington Post](#), 15 November 2022 [Accessed 16 November 2022].

<sup>155</sup> See for example [Ukraine Tops Agenda at China's BRICS Summit \(voanews.com\)](#), 23 June 2022 [Accessed 16 November 2022].

## Conclusion

This article suggests that future developments in the war are likely to be in the form of an escalation and counter-escalation that will not give either side a decisive advantage. Indeed, the author of this piece would argue that had Zelensky's Ukrainian government been willing to negotiate back in April then the eventual outcome on the ground would probably have ended up being better for Ukraine than is likely to be the case today or in the future.<sup>156</sup> Such an assertion has of course to be understood in the context of damage done to Ukraine since April.

That a scenario that allows for some sort of Russian *victory* can also be presented as a Ukrainian one is not however something that is being highlighted in the Western press. For Ukraine, any plausible scenario at this point will involve Ukraine having defended most of its territory from its larger neighbour and accelerated the incorporation of the remaining territory into the Western political and military alliance systems, even if not NATO. That territory will have a much smaller Russian-identifying minority to destabilise the country than was the case in 2014. The human cost of trying to *teach Russia a lesson* for its *transgressions* will be high in any scenario but could be considerably higher and more widely spread if the current escalation and counter-escalation continues for the foreseeable future. In a situation where neither Putin's nor Zelensky's government is likely to back down, it is probable that the deciding factor in bringing an end to the current war is likely to be the failure of European powers to sustain their support for Ukraine during the longer term – ultimately forcing Ukraine to accept some sort of ceasefire. In the longer term in exchange for accepting a *de facto* loss of territory Ukraine is likely to be rewarded with EU membership, even if the cost of that membership is likely to be astronomical for other EU members.

Although cracks in the Western alliance supporting Ukraine might be the deciding factor in bringing an end to the bloodshed, such an outcome is some way off. Consequently, the killing and destruction are, sadly, likely to continue for some time.

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<sup>156</sup> As suggested in Alexander Hill, [Now Is the Time for Zelensky To Push for Peace - The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy - l'Institut pour la paix et la diplomatie \(peacediplomacy.org\)](https://www.peacediplomacy.org/2022/04/22/now-is-the-time-for-zelensky-to-push-for-peace-the-institute-for-peace-and-diplomacy/), 22 April 2022 [Accessed 9 November 2022].