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Russia's War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects

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Andrew S. Bowen

Analyst in Russian and
European Affairs

Russia's War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects

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

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

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

Through the winter of 2022-2023 and the war's one-year mark, fighting gradually focused around the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut, as both sides began preparing and reconstituting forces for expected offensives in the spring. Russia's armed forces had launched a new offensive early in the winter, likely due to Moscow's continued and unrealistic demands for gains, and had expended crucial personnel, equipment, and ammunition. In early 2023, Ukraine established new units that were trained and equipped by the United States and allied partners to spearhead a counteroffensive to retake occupied territory. Ukraine's long-anticipated counteroffensive to retake Russian-occupied territory in southern and eastern Ukraine has run into heavier-than-expected resistance, forcing the UAF to adjust tactics and achieve incremental gains against fortified Russian lines.

In contrast to previous periods of the war that saw rapid maneuver warfare, the war entering fall 2023 has become attritional, with each side seeking to wear down and outlast the other. Casualties, equipment losses, and the need for ammunition are acute as Russia and Ukraine seek to reconstitute units and rotate forces on the frontlines. For Russia, recruiting remains constrained due to political considerations and implications for domestic stability. Ukraine's relatively smaller population has been almost entirely mobilized. Sustainment, rather than the introduction of new capabilities or units, likely will be the focus for both Russia and Ukraine. The ability to repair and replace equipment, recruit new personnel, and procure artillery ammunition will be among the key factors determining success in the coming months.

Congress has taken numerous measures in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The 118th Congress is likely to continue tracking developments in Ukraine closely as it considers upcoming policy decisions on U.S. and international efforts to support Ukraine militarily, conducts oversight of security assistance, and examines U.S. and international policies to deter further Russian aggression. For other CRS products on Russia's war in Ukraine, see CRS Report R47054, *Russia's War Against Ukraine: Related CRS Products*.

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Introduction

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

This report addresses Russian and Ukrainian military and intelligence aspects of the war, which are of interest to many in Congress as Congress considers various legislative measures and conducts oversight of U.S. policy. It provides an overview of the conflict, including the run-up to the invasion, the various phases of the war to date, recent developments on the ground, and the conflict's near-term outlook. The report includes brief discussions about potential Russian war expectations and military command and personnel challenges. For other CRS products related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including U.S. policy dimensions, see CRS Report R47054, *Russia's War Against Ukraine: Related CRS Products*.

Prelude to Invasion: Military Buildup and Force Posture

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

Throughout December 2021, Russia continued to build up its forces in the region. Prior to the February 2022 invasion, Russia had mobilized between 150,000 and 190,000 personnel and 120 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) on its border with Ukraine,¹ in Belarus, and in Ukraine's occupied Crimea region, according to U.S. government estimates.²

¹ Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) are ad hoc, task-specific formations designed to operate autonomously as combined arms formations. BTGs are built around infantry and armor units, with supporting air defense, artillery, and other units. BTGs comprise the higher readiness units of the Russian military and are staffed by professional (also known as contract) personnel. Each Russian regiment or brigade is intended to generate two BTGs. In August 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated the Russian military had 168 BTGs. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces* (Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), pp. 34-40; Tass, "Russian Army Operates Around 170 Battalion Tactical Groups—Defense Chief," August 20, 2021.

² U.S. Mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "U.S. Statement for the Vienna Document Joint PC-FSC Chapter III Meeting," February 12, 2022; Department of Defense, "Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing," press release, March 3, 2022.

Prior to the February 2022 invasion, the Russian military was a tiered readiness force, with units varying in levels of staffing and readiness.³ Additionally, since 2012-2014, Russia has expanded its ground forces structure by creating new units without increasing the available personnel. However, as new units were created, the actual staffing level was reduced further due to insufficient personnel. Each Russian brigade or regiment is intended to field and deploy two Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) of 700-900 contract soldiers (a third would consist of conscripts), but it became clear that the BTGs varied in staffing levels. Some BTGs deployed with 400-600 contract personnel. The result was that the Russian military had a relatively limited core of deployable maneuver combat formations of contract personnel relative to the total size of the military.⁴

During this buildup, analysts documented the movement of Russian units from across Russia toward Ukraine.⁵ The 41st and 2nd CAAs moved from the Central Military District into Belarus and to Ukraine's northeast border with Russia; the 1st Guards Tank Army and the 6th CAA moved from the Western Military District to Ukraine's eastern border with Russia; the 49th and 58th CAAs moved from the Southern Military District to occupied Crimea and to Ukraine's southeast border with Russia; and the 35th and 36th CAAs (and elements of the 29th and 5th CAAs) moved from the Eastern Military District to Belarus.⁶ In addition, Russia deployed elite units—such as Russian Airborne (VDV), Naval Infantry, and *spetsnaz* (elite light infantry units used for reconnaissance and direct action)—around Ukraine's borders.⁷

The buildup reflected the full range of Russian military capabilities, including artillery and support systems. The ground forces included air defense, artillery and rocket artillery, long-range precision missile systems (Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile [SRBM] systems), electronic warfare, support, and logistics units.⁸ Additionally, by February 2022, Russia had mobilized large numbers of Aerospace Forces (VKS) fighter, fighter-bomber, and helicopter squadrons, which could play a key role in an invasion.⁹

On February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would recognize the independence of the DNR and LNR. Russian recognition appeared to include the entire regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (collectively known as the Donbas), most of which had

³ Andrew S. Bowen, "Russia's Deceptively Weak Military," *National Interest*, June 7, 2015; Roger McDermott, "Shoigu Builds Mythical Russian Army," *Jamestown Foundation*, May 24, 2016. For a nuanced view on Western estimates of the Russian military prior to the 2022 invasion, see Bettina Renz, "Western Estimates of Russian Military Capabilities and the Invasion of Ukraine," *Problems of Post-Communism* (2023), pp. 1-13.

⁴ Dara Massicot, "The Russian Military's People Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, May 18, 2022; Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, "Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military's Ill-Fated Force Design," *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2022.

⁵ For more on the Russian military buildup, see CRS Insight IN11806, *Russian Military Buildup Along the Ukrainian Border*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

⁶ Units from all 11 Combined Arms Armies (CAAs) and one Tank Army (as well as the 14th and 22nd Army Corps) were present on the borders of Ukraine in the run-up to the invasion. For more, see Konrad Muzyka, "Tracking Russian Deployments near Ukraine—Autumn-Winter 2021-22," *Rochan Consulting*, November 15, 2021.

⁷ VDV include elite paratrooper and air assault forces. VDV act as Russia's elite rapid response forces. For more on Russian military capabilities and structure see CRS In Focus IF11589, *Russian Armed Forces: Capabilities*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

⁸ Michael R. Gordon and Max Rust, "Russian Buildup near Ukraine Features Potent Weapons Systems, Well-Trained Troops," *Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 2022.

⁹ Russia's Aerospace Forces include the air force, air defense, and space defenses forces. Russia merged these organizations into the VKS in 2015. Julian E. Barnes, Michael Crowley, and Eric Schmitt, "Russia Positioning Helicopters, in Possible Sign of Ukraine Plans," *New York Times*, January 10, 2021; Tass, "Russia's Su-35S Fighter Jets Deployed in Belarus for Upcoming Drills-Ministry," January 26, 2021.

remained under Ukrainian control since Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and not just territory controlled by DNR/LNR.

Shortly thereafter, Putin announced Russia would send "peacekeepers" into the DNR/LNR, claiming they were to defend against Ukrainian plans for invasion and sabotage attempts. These Russian charges had no basis in fact. Despite denials from Russian officials, Russia had spent months amassing a significant portion of its military capabilities around Ukraine.¹⁰

On February 24—following months of warning and concern from the Biden Administration, European allies, NATO, and some Members of Congress—Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia claimed its invasion was to conduct a "special military operation" to protect the civilian population and to "demilitarize" and "de-Nazify" Ukraine; observers generally understood the latter term as a false pretext for overthrowing the democratically elected Ukrainian government.¹¹

Figure I. Ukraine



Source: Created by Congressional Research Service using data from U.S. Department of State, Global Admin, and ESRI.

¹⁰ Tara Copp, "They Could Go at Any Hour Now; U.S. Official Warns of Larger Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Defense One*, February 23, 2022.

¹¹ Audrius Rickus, "Baseless Claims of 'Denazification' Have Underscored Russian Aggression Since World War II," *Washington Post*, March 9, 2022.

Initial Invasion

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

Russia initially focused on achieving air superiority, degrading Ukrainian air defenses, and undermining the Ukrainian military's ability to coordinate defenses and counterattacks. Russia's initial bombardment, however, was more limited in duration and scale than some expected. In particular, analysts noted that the Russian air forces (VKS) failed to conduct effective suppression of enemy air defense missions, either because of an unwillingness to act or because of a lack of capability.¹⁴ The Russian military may have underestimated the level of Ukrainian resistance and been initially hesitant to inflict collateral damage on civilian targets that would be crucial for supporting a Russian occupation.¹⁵ Russia's failure to degrade the Ukrainian air force and air defenses, as well as Ukrainian command and control capabilities, allowed the Ukrainian military to respond more successfully to Russia's invasion than expected, both at the outset and subsequently.

Initially, Russian forces committed to multiple lines of advance rather than concentrating on one single front. In the north, Russian forces attempted to break through Ukrainian defenses around Kyiv, from both the northwest and the east. In the east, Russian forces surrounded Kharkiv and attacked toward Izyum. In the south, Russian forces conducted an offensive to seize Mykolaiv in the southwest and Mariupol in the southeast. Each advance appeared to compete against the others for increasingly limited reinforcements, logistics, and air support.¹⁶ Russian forces advanced quickly toward Kherson (which they captured on March 2, 2022) and eventually turned toward the Ukrainian coastal city of Mariupol. Analysts argue that Russian advances in the south were successful in part because they involved some of Russia's most modern and professional units from the Southern Military District and had better logistical support than other units, due to rail access from Crimea. In other regions, Russia made slow but initially steady progress, seeking to encircle rather than capture major urban centers such as Sumy, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv.¹⁷

Kyiv was an initial key Russian military target. Led by elite, but comparatively lightly equipped, VDV, *spetsnaz*, and reconnaissance units, Russian forces advanced along the western side of Kyiv

¹² Isabelle Khurshudyan et al., "As West Unleashes Sanctions, Russian Military Pushes Toward Kyiv," *Washington Post*, February 24, 2022.

¹³ RFE/RL, "Zelenskiy Says Ukraine Has Suffered 'Serious Losses' After Russian Air Strikes Pound Dozens of Targets," February 24, 2022.

¹⁴ Economist, "Curious Case of Russia's Missing Air Force," March 8, 2022. Some analysis subsequently has argued that Russia's initial air campaign was possibly larger and more effective than initially believed. See Justin Bronk, Nick Reynolds, and Jack Watling, *The Russian Air War and Ukrainian Requirements for Air Defense*, RUSI, London, November 7, 2022.

¹⁵ Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "Russian's Assault in Ukraine Slows After an Aggressive Start," *New York Times*, February 25, 2022.

¹⁶ John Paul Rathbone, Sam Jones, and Daniel Dombey, "Why Russia Is Deploying More Troops to Ukraine," *Financial Times*, March 17, 2022; Stephen Fidler and Thomas Grove, "Behind the Front Lines, Russia's Military Struggles to Supply Its Forces," *Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2022.

¹⁷ Richard Perez-Pena, "Russia Batters and Encircles Ukrainian Cities, as Diplomacy Falters," *New York Times*, March 10, 2022.

and reached the outskirts of the city within days. In the early hours of the invasion, Russian VDV units conducted a risky air assault to seize the Antonov International Airport in Hostomel, on the outskirts of Kyiv. Analysts have argued that the Russian attack to seize the airport was intended to allow the rapid introduction of follow-on VDV units to surround and seize the Ukrainian capital. Ukrainian forces, however, responded and repulsed the attack, reportedly causing heavy Russian casualties and shooting down several helicopters.¹⁸

Russian forces ran into effective Ukrainian resistance from the invasion's outset. Despite not announcing a general mobilization until February 25, after the invasion began, the Ukrainian military immediately hindered, deflected, and imposed costs on Russian forces in personnel and equipment. The Ukrainian military exploited numerous tactical and operational deficiencies of Russian forces (which were overextended in many cases), allowing the Ukrainian military to conduct ambushes and counterattacks.¹⁹

Russian units operated with little tactical sophistication and not as combined arms formations, leaving units exposed and unprepared for Ukrainian resistance, according to observers and analysts.²⁰ As Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated to Congress in early March 2022, "We assess Moscow underestimated the strength of Ukraine's resistance and the degree of internal military challenges we are observing, which include an ill-constructed plan, morale issues and considerable logistical issues."²¹

Overall, training and professionalism of Russian units appeared much lower than expected, even among supposedly "elite" units. For example, elite but relatively lightly equipped units (such as VDV, *spetsnaz*, and reconnaissance units) conducted operations they were not trained for or equipped to conduct, such as advancing into urban areas, where they appeared to suffer heavy casualties due to the lack of heavy armored support.²²

Russian armored units advanced without infantry support in numerous instances. In one example, Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) units reportedly advanced alongside, and sometimes in front of, Russian military forces, apparently with little coordination.²³ Contributing to the confusion, analysts documented Russian units operating without encrypted communications, often using civilian equipment to communicate.²⁴

¹⁸ Paul Sonne et al., "Battle for Kyiv: Ukrainian Valor, Russian Blunders Combined to Save the Capital," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2022; Liam Collins, Michael Kofman, and John Spencer, "The Battle of Hostomel Airport: A Key Moment in Russia's Defeat in Kyiv," *War on the Rocks*, August 10, 2023.

¹⁹ For more, see CRS In Focus IF12150, *Ukrainian Military Performance and Outlook*, by Andrew S. Bowen; Mykhaylo Zabrotskyi et al., *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022*, RUSI, London, November 30, 2022.

²⁰ Mark Galeotti, "Echoes of Afghanistan in Russian Soldiers' Poor Discipline in Ukraine," *Moscow Times*, April 1, 2022; Robert Dalsjo, Michael Jonsson, and Johan Norberg, "A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War," *Survival* vol. 64, no. 3 (2022), pp. 7-28.

²¹ U.S. Congress, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *Worldwide Threats*, 117th Cong., March 8, 2022.

²² Analysts note these units have suffered particularly high casualties, which undermined Russian military effectiveness due to their perceived high professionalism and ratio of contract/professional servicemen. Mark Urban, "The Heavy Losses of an Elite Russian Regiment in Ukraine," BBC, April 2, 2022; James Beardsworth and Irina Shcherbakova, "Are There Even Any Left? 100 Days of War in Ukraine for an Elite Russian Unit," *Moscow Times*, June 4, 2022.

²³ *Rosgvardiya* units are key internal security troops, neither equipped nor trained for conventional combat and likely sent into Ukraine early in the invasion to prevent protests against any new pro-Russian Ukrainian leadership. See CRS In Focus IF11647, *Russian Law Enforcement and Internal Security Agencies*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

²⁴ Alex Horton and Shane Harris, "Russian Troops' Tendency to Talk on Unsecured Lines Is Proving Costly," *Washington Post*, March 27, 2022.

In addition, the Russian military struggled with command and control, both at the tactical and the operational levels. First, reports indicated there was no overall Russian operational commander at the time. As a result, it appears each CAA and axis of advance was operating independently, with questionable levels of coordination.²⁵ Second, Russian commanders appeared unprepared for many aspects of the invasion, as evidenced by a lack of coordination among branches (such as VKS and Rosgvardiya) and between units. Reporting indicates that communication problems compounded these command and control issues, contributing to higher-ranking officers moving closer to the frontlines and contributing to casualties among these officers.²⁶

Moreover, Russia's cyber operations were largely ineffective during the initial invasion, surprising analysts. Some analysts suggest Russian cyber performance possibly indicates the limitations of cyber operations in a kinetic conflict as well as structural limitations of cyber operations in the Russian military.²⁷

Possible Russian Intentions and Expectations

Analysts continue to speculate about Russia's initial objectives and plans in launching its offensive against Ukraine. Many analysts believe Russia's expectations were based on faulty assumptions that undermined Russia's conduct of the invasion. If true, incorrect political assumptions possibly contributed to unrealistic objectives and timetables imposed onto the Russian military, providing a partial explanation for the Russian military's unpreparedness and poor performance.

U.S. officials and some analysts believe Russia's initial operation was to "decapitate" the Ukrainian government and rely on fast-moving, elite units to quickly seize key junctures, similar to Russia's seizure of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014. Some analysts speculate that Russia may have based such a strategy on assumptions that the Ukrainian military would be ineffective and the Ukrainian political leadership could be easily replaced. As Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Burns testified before the House Intelligence Committee in March 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin "was confident that he had modernized his military and they were capable of a quick, decisive victory at minimal cost. He's been proven wrong on every count."

Analysts speculate that Putin and other Russian policymakers may have held these faulty assumptions in part due to poor intelligence and a willingness by subordinates to convey only positive information to Russian decisionmakers. Recent media reporting indicates the FSB overstated its influence and agent networks inside Ukraine, possibly contributing to a false expectation of a quick regime change. Additionally, many observers speculate a relatively small circle of advisers may have outsized influence on Putin and may have contributed to potentially unrealistic assumptions. This circle of advisers includes Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, who may have overstated the Russian military's capabilities.

Sources: Adam E. Casey and Seva Gunitsky, "The Bully in the Bubble," *Foreign Affairs*, February 4, 2022; U.S. Congress, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *Worldwide Threats*, 117th Cong., March 8, 2022; Steve Holland and Andrea Shalal, "Putin Misled by 'Yes Men' in Military Afraid to Tell Him the Truth, White House and EU Officials Say," *Reuters*, March 31, 2022; Mark Galeotti, "The Interfering Tsar: Why Putin Is Ukraine's Best Hope of Victory," *The Times*, April 23, 2022; Greg Miller and Catherine Belton, "Russia's Spies Misread Ukraine and Misled Kremlin as War Loomed," *Washington Post*, August 19, 2022; Michael Schwartz et al., "Putin's War," *New York Times*, December 16, 2022.

²⁵ Reportedly, each CAA brought and set up its own headquarters structure rather than integrating under the command of the Western or Southern Military Districts, as most analysts expected. Tim Ripley, "Russian Military Adapts Command and Control for Ukraine Operations," *Janes IHS*, March 7, 2022; Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "Russia's War Lacks a Battlefield Commander, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, March 31, 2022.

²⁶ Compared with Western militaries, Russian commanders have smaller staffs to assist command and generally are closer to the frontlines, which makes casualties among Russian officers more likely. Many analysts, however, have been surprised by the number and ranks of officers killed.

²⁷ Gavin Wilde, *Cyber Operations: Russia's Unmet Expectations*, Carnegie Endowment, Washington D.C., December 12, 2022; Jon Bateman, *Russia's Wartime Cyber Operations in Ukraine: Military Impacts, Influences, and Implications*, Carnegie Endowment, Washington D.C., December 16, 2022.

March-May 2022

After early March 2022, Russian forces attempted to adapt to the reality of effective Ukrainian resistance. Russia made some changes to its military operations, including more coordination between units and a greater attempt to operate as combined arms formations, increased air support, and significantly higher levels of artillery and rocket artillery fire.²⁸ By March 7, 2022, U.S. officials believed Russia had committed “nearly 100 percent” of its available forces into Ukraine.²⁹ The Russian VKS increased its number of sorties and operations, although the increased sortie rate also meant heavier losses.³⁰

Toward the end of March 2022, Russian offensives around Kyiv stalled. After failing to achieve a decisive victory quickly, Russia appeared to re-evaluate its objectives and strategy toward achieving territorial gains in the south and east of Ukraine. On March 25, the Russian Ministry of Defense held a press conference alleging that Russia had mostly met its initial objectives and would move on to the second phase of the operation, focusing on eastern Ukraine, including the Donbas.³¹ U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan stated on April 4, 2022, that “Russia is repositioning its forces to concentrate its offensive operations in eastern and parts of southern Ukraine.... All indications are that Russia will seek to surround and overwhelm Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine.”³²

On April 13, 2022, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, the Slava class missile cruiser *Moskva*, reportedly was struck by two Ukrainian R-360 Neptune anti-ship missiles.³³ Russian forces attempted to tow the heavily damaged cruiser back to port in Sevastopol, but the damage was catastrophic and the ship eventually sank.³⁴ The sinking provided a morale boost to Ukrainian forces and undermined Russian efforts to threaten an amphibious assault against Odessa, potentially freeing up Ukrainian forces defending the city. Russia's new flagship of the Black Sea Fleet is the Project 11356 frigate *Admiral Makarov*.

Subsequently, Russia redirected forces to support operations in the east to cut off Ukrainian military units in the Donbas. On April 12, President Putin stated that Russia's “military operation will continue until its full completion” but said, “Our goal is to help the people in the Donbas, who feel their unbreakable bond with Russia.”³⁵ The terrain in the Donbas favored Russian forces, with consolidated logistics and its advantages in artillery.³⁶

²⁸ Dan Lamothe, “Russia's Invasion Began with Precision Missiles, But Weapons Are Changing as Siege War Begins,” *Washington Post*, March 1, 2022.

²⁹ Quint Forgey, “Putin Sends ‘Nearly 100 Percent’ of Russian Forces at Border into Ukraine,” *Politico*, March 7, 2022.

³⁰ Dan Lamothe, “Russian Air Force Action Increases Despite Flood of Antiaircraft Missiles into Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, March 22, 2022.

³¹ Konrad Muzyka, “Ukraine Conflict Monitor: March 25, 2022,” *Rochan Consulting*, March 26, 2022; Jim Sciutto, “U.S. Intel Assess ‘Major’ Strategy Shift by Russia as It Moves Some Forces away from Kyiv,” CNN, March 31, 2022.

³² White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,” press briefing, April 4, 2022.

³³ Adam Taylor and Claire Parker, “‘Neptune’ Missile Strike Shows Strength of Ukraine's Homegrown Weapons,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2022.

³⁴ Brad Lendon, “Moskva Sinking: What Really Happened to the Pride of Russia's Fleet?” CNN, April 15, 2022.

³⁵ Anton Troianovski, “Putin Says Peace Talks Are at a ‘Dead End’ and Calls Atrocities in Bucha ‘Fake,’” *New York Times*, April 12, 2022.

³⁶ Jack Watling, “Why the Battle for Donbas Will Be Very Different from the Assault on Kyiv,” *Guardian*, April 9, 2022; Howard Altman, “Ukraine's Ability to Withstand Russian Artillery Critical to Fight for Donbas,” *The Drive*, April 19, 2022.

On April 18, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reported a new Russian offensive in the Donbas after a barrage of Russian missile strikes across Ukraine.³⁷ Russian forces initially conducted slow and gradual probing attacks against Ukrainian forces, including the use of heavy artillery and rocket artillery to support operations. Russia concentrated on pressing Ukrainian forces south of Izyum, west from Severodonetsk toward Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, and from Donetsk to create a large encirclement of UAF.³⁸ Russian forces could not break through Ukrainian defenses around Izyum, partially resulting from too few units and a gradual deployment, even with reinforcements from the abandoned effort to take Kyiv.³⁹

Russia's redeployment of forces away from Kyiv and toward eastern Ukraine indicated that the Russian military needed to rest and resupply after using most of its combat-effective units. During this time, analysts noted the need for Russian personnel reinforcements, not only to replace losses but also to support further Russian offensives.⁴⁰ Conditions forced Russia to pull units from foreign bases to help replace and rotate out units and deployed private military companies (including heavy use of the Wagner Group Private Military Company [PMC]).⁴¹ Despite the slow pace of Russian progress and need for reinforcements, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee on May 20, 2022, that "we assess President Putin is preparing for prolonged conflict in Ukraine during which he still intends to achieve goals beyond the Donbas."⁴²

A key Russian military objective was the coastal city of Mariupol, in the Donetsk region. After weeks of bombardment and fighting, Ukrainian military forces and large numbers of civilians were isolated in the Azovstal iron and steel plant in Mariupol.⁴³ On April 21, Putin announced that Russia had seized Mariupol and that Russian forces would not assault the Azovstal plant but would surround and seal it off, despite Ukrainian forces' continued resistance.⁴⁴ Ukraine announced on May 16 that it had instructed its remaining troops at Azovstal to cease combat missions.⁴⁵ Shortly thereafter, Ukrainian troops began surrendering and were evacuated to Russian-controlled areas

Russia also continued its use of long-range PGMs against targets in western Ukraine, but the VKS did not seek further air superiority beyond eastern Ukraine. Russia conducted long-range

³⁷ Max Seddon and Henry Foy, "Vladimir Putin Abandons Hopes of Ukraine Deal and Shifts to Land-Grab Strategy," *Financial Times*, April 24, 2022.

³⁸ Konrad Muzyka, "Ukraine Conflict Monitor: April 16-18, 2022," *Rochan Consulting*, April 19, 2022; Christopher Miller and Paul McLeary, "Heavy Weaponry Pours into Ukraine as Commanders Become More Desperate," *Politico*, April 25, 2022; Author correspondence with Michael Kofman.

³⁹ Mike Eckel, "Fizzled Faltering? 'Anemic'? Why Russia's Donbas Offensive Isn't Going Exactly as Anticipated," RFE/RL, May 3, 2022; Konrad Muzyka, "Ukraine Conflict Monitor: 9-15 May 2022," *Rochan Consulting*, May 15, 2022.

⁴⁰ Department of Defense, "Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing," press release, April 8, 2022; *Economist*, "Rob Lee on Why Attrition Will Be a Critical Factor in the Battle for the Donbas," April 23, 2022.

⁴¹ For more on the Wagner Group, see CRS In Focus IF12344, *Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)*, by Andrew S. Bowen

⁴² U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, *To Receive Testimony on Worldwide Threats*, 117th Cong., May 10, 2022.

⁴³ Amy Mackinnon, "What the Fall of Mariupol Would Mean for the War," *Foreign Policy*, April 20, 2022.

⁴⁴ Michael Schwartz, "Ukrainians in Mariupol's Steel Mill Are Holding On, Despite Intensifying Attacks, a Commander Tells the Times," *New York Times*, April 24, 2022.

⁴⁵ Michael Schwartz, "Last Stand at Azovstal: Inside the Siege That Shaped the Ukraine War," *New York Times*, July 27, 2022.

PGM strikes against what Russian officials said were Ukrainian defense industry and infrastructure targets in an attempt to cripple and undermine the Ukrainian military's long-term capability. However, analysts note the questionable precision, capability, and quantity of PGMs still available to Russian forces.⁴⁶ U.S. officials have stated that most PGMs appear to be air-launched cruise missiles from bombers inside Russia.⁴⁷

May-September 2022

After the capture of Mariupol, Russia refocused efforts on seizing key urban and infrastructure areas in Donetsk and Luhansk. Due to losses, Russia was unable to concentrate sufficient combat power on multiple advances, forcing it to refocus efforts on a single objective while consolidating its hold on captured territory (such as in Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhia). By mid-May 2022, Russia appeared unable to capture the key cities of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, a likely target of Russia's refocused offensives. Instead, Russia focused on seizing the towns of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, which would give Russia almost total control over Luhansk region.⁴⁸

Figure 2. Donbas Region of Ukraine



Source: Created by Congressional Research Service using data from U.S. Department of State, Global Admin, and ESRI.

impose as much attrition on Russian forces as possible. Nevertheless, Russian forces, including Chechen Rosgvardiya and DNR/LNR troops, continued their offensive into Severodonetsk and gradually seized control of the city after Ukraine ordered its forces to retreat to Lysychansk. Russian forces continued to advance north from Popasna toward Bakhmut, threatening to cut off

In contrast to the early days of the invasion, the fighting in the Donbas resembled a more traditional conventional conflict of slow but intense fighting, and Russia reverted to its traditional reliance on the massed use of artillery and rocket artillery. Russian forces appeared to conduct a pincer movement to cut off Ukrainian forces in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk.⁴⁹ In the north, Russian forces pushed southeast from Izyum, capturing Lyman and attempting to make several crossings of the Siverskyi Donets river near Bilohorivka, but came under Ukrainian artillery fire and suffered heavy casualties. In the Donbas, Russia relied heavily on Wagner Group PMC and DNR/LNR units, many of whom were forcibly conscripted.

The UAF continued to staunchly defend territory instead of conducting an organized withdrawal, leading some analysts to speculate that Ukraine's strategy was to

⁴⁶ John Ismay, "Russian Guided Weapons Miss the Mark, U.S. Defense Officials Say," *New York Times*, May 9, 2022; Thomas Newdick, "We May Have Our First Sight of a Russian Bomber Launching Missiles at Ukraine," *The Drive*, May 11, 2022.

⁴⁷ Department of Defense, "Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing," press release, May 18, 2022.

⁴⁸ Frederick W. Kagan, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 28," *Institute for the Study of War*, May 28, 2022.

⁴⁹ Konrad Muzyka, "Ukraine Conflict Monitor: May 21-23, 2022," *Rochan Consulting*, May 24, 2022.

UAF units and envelope Lysychansk. Subsequently, the UAF withdrew from Lysychansk to prepared defensive lines between Bakhmut and Siversk.⁵⁰

Reported Russian and Ukrainian Casualties

Reported numbers of wartime casualties have varied widely. Generally, sources provide ranges or estimates of possible casualties due to the uncertain and changing nature of assessments. Below are some estimates mentioned in various press reports through September 2023.

- In January 2023, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley stated that Russia has suffered “significantly well over 100,000” soldiers killed and wounded
- In February 2023, the Center for Strategic and International Studies estimated that “Russia suffered more combat deaths in Ukraine in the first year of the war than in all of its wars since World War II combined”
- In April 2023, some media reporting estimated combined casualties suffered by Russian and Ukrainian forces were over 350,000
- In May 2023, U.S. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby stated at least 100,000 Russian fighters had been killed or wounded in the previous five months, at least half of those from the Wagner Group Private Military Company
- In July 2023, Mediazona and Meduza, using “records from the National Probate Registry and data from the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat),” estimated that as of “late May 2023, roughly 47,000 Russian men under the age of 50 have died in the war. To be absolutely precise, we can assert with a 95% probability that the true number of casualties falls between 40,000 and 55,000. This estimate does not take into account the losses of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR)”
- In August 2023, Mediazona and the BBC confirmed 30,698 Russian combat deaths using publicly available data
- In August 2023, the *New York Times* reported that U.S. officials estimate Ukraine and Russia have suffered a combined total of nearly 500,000 killed or wounded

Sources: Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Soaring Death Toll Gives Grim Insight into Russian Tactics,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2023; Seth G. Jones, Riley McCabe, and Alexander Palmer, *Ukrainian Innovation in a War of Attrition*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 27, 2023; Guy Faulconbridge, “Ukraine War, Already with up to 354,000 Casualties, Likely to Last Past 2023,” *Reuters*, April 12, 2023; Zolan Kanno-Youngs, “U.S. Says 100,000 Russian Casualties in Ukraine in Past 5 Months,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2023; Mediazona, “At Least 47,000 Russian Soldiers Killed in Ukraine. A Data Investigation by Mediazona and Meduza,” July 10, 2023; Mediazona, “Russian Casualties in Ukraine,” August 24, 2023.

The UAF suffered heavy casualties during the fighting for Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, including among experienced veterans who volunteered for the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) and reserve units.⁵¹ The UAF broke up the core of its maneuver formations into smaller units to spearhead localized counterattacks and to shore up TDF and Reserve units staffing defensive positions.⁵² Many UAF counteroffensives, such as outside of Kharkiv, slowed as Russian units regrouped and UAF forces concentrated on defending the Ukrainian-controlled areas of the Donbas, leaving TDF units to defend the frontline but unable to launch further offensive action.

⁵⁰ Yaroslav Trofimov, “Ukrainian Troops Retreat from Severodonetsk After Weeks of Brutal Battle,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2022; Jonathan Beale, “Ukraine Confirms Russia Captured Eastern City Lysychansk,” *BBC*, July 3, 2022.

⁵¹ Stephen Kalin, “Ukraine’s War of Attrition Exact Heavy Toll on Both Sides,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2022.

⁵² Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, “Ukraine at War: Paving the Road From Survival to Victory,” *RUSI*, July 4, 2022, p. 17.

The UAF also struggled with secure communications and coordination issues between the TDF and regular military, as well as a dire need for artillery and heavy weapon support.⁵³

Beginning in mid-May 2022, the UAF began receiving significant shipments of U.S. and Western artillery systems, specifically the U.S. M777 155mm howitzer and ammunition. Security assistance has been critical to sustaining UAF operations and countering the Russian advantage in artillery and rocket artillery, since the UAF was running low on ammunition and parts for its Soviet/Russian artillery systems. Nevertheless, training time and overall shortages have resulted in most UAF units still relying on older Soviet/Russian systems while waiting for new Western weaponry.⁵⁴ By July, Ukraine began receiving U.S.-supplied M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) and M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), providing the UAF with significantly improved targeting ability, including increased range and precision accuracy.⁵⁵ Early assessments by U.S. officials and other observers indicated that the UAF were using these systems effectively, including to target key Russian command and control, logistics, and transport infrastructure.⁵⁶ One significant challenge, however, has been maintaining and repairing the vast number of Western systems the UAF has received, all with different standards and requirements for operating.

Over the rest of July, Russian forces attempted to regroup and take an “operational pause” after suffering heavy casualties capturing Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Russia likely had exhausted most of its forces and required time to refit, resupply, and reorganize. Russian forces did not achieve any significant territorial progress over the next weeks, other than small gains between Siversk and Bakhmut, and appeared to focus on solidifying their control over existing territory.⁵⁷ Russia increasingly relied on Wagner Group PMC and DNR/LNR forces to probe UAF lines and then direct artillery and rocket artillery upon making contact. Open-source reporting continued to document instances of low Russian morale and reports of Russian soldiers refusing to fight, resigning from their contracts before deployment, or refusing orders from their superiors.⁵⁸

By early August 2022, as Russian advances stalled, a gradual stalemate and war of attrition began to set in. Russia continued some offensive operations toward Bakhmut and Avdiivkain the Donetsk region.⁵⁹ The UAF appeared to prepare a shift from defensive to offensive operations. Ukraine began carrying out a series of partisan attacks (including assassinations) against officials in Russia-occupied regions, Russian government infrastructure, and key air bases and supply positions in Crimea. These attacks, conducted by Ukrainian Special Forces and local supporters,

⁵³ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Natalia Yermak, “On Front Lines, Communication Breakdowns Prove Costly for Ukraine,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2022; Viviana Salama, “Ukraine Faces Shortfall in Weapons as It Gears Up for First Major Counteroffensive,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2022.

⁵⁴ CRS In Focus IF12040, *U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine*, by Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt; Serhiy Morgunov, “As They Wait for Weapons, Ukrainians Hold the Line with Soviet Artillery,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 2022.

⁵⁵ Jack Detsch, “Ukraine Is Bringing a Big Gun to a Knife Fight,” *Foreign Policy*, July 13, 2022.

⁵⁶ Illia Ponomarenko, “Ukraine Targets Russia’s Ammunition Depots, Undermining Its Artillery Advantage,” *Kyiv Independent*, July 8, 2022.

⁵⁷ Konrad Muzyka, “Ukraine Conflict Monitor: 18-24 July 2022,” Rochan Consulting, July 25, 2022; Dara Massicot, “Moscow’s New Strategy in Ukraine Is Just as Bad as the Old One,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 15, 2022; Erika Solomon, “Behind Russia’s ‘Pause’ Are Signs of a Troubled Effort to Regroup,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2022.

⁵⁸ Timofei Rozhanskiy, “Why Russian Soldiers Are Refusing to Fight in the War on Ukraine,” RFE/RL, July 20, 2022; Pjotr Sauer, “Russian Soldiers Accuse Superiors of Jailing Them for Refusing to Fight,” *Guardian*, August 2, 2022.

⁵⁹ Kateryna Stepanenko et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 2,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 2, 2022.

drones, and missile strikes, have destabilized the Russian military's control over the region and forced Russia to devote more forces to counterinsurgency and internal security missions.⁶⁰

The UAF began preparations for a counteroffensive by conducting strikes across Kherson and Crimea to degrade Russian capabilities and hinder the resupply of its forces in Kherson, including attacks against key logistics targets and the bridges connecting occupied Kherson with the rest of occupied southern Ukraine. According to U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley, Ukraine conducted over 400 HIMARS strikes by September 8.⁶¹ These strikes likely seriously strained Russian logistics and artillery ammunition supply by targeting previously unreachable depots.⁶²

The UAF also deployed high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARM), used to target radar or electronic warfare systems, on its Russian-made MiG-29 fighters. Russian forces appeared to redeploy from Donetsk and Luhansk to southern Ukraine in preparation for a UAF offensive.⁶³ Observers had noted reports of Ukrainian preparation for an offensive for months but speculated whether the UAF had enough trained personnel and sufficient equipment (such as tanks and armored vehicles to rapidly transport infantry) to sustain offensive operations, as well as possible risks of exposing other fronts to counterattack from Russian forces by drawing away resources.⁶⁴

Kherson Region Offensive

On August 29, 2022, Ukraine launched a long-awaited offensive into the Kherson region in the south. U.S. officials initially believed the offensive was part of a “shaping” strategy to improve the UAF position for future counteroffensives.⁶⁵ Some reports indicated that Ukrainian forces, advised by U.S. officials, determined a smaller offensive would give the UAF flexibility to deploy resources to other fronts and conduct multiple counteroffensives against exposed Russian lines.⁶⁶

By early September 2022, UAF offensives had made small but sustained progress across three fronts in Kherson, pushing back some Russian forces. UAF forces ran into significant and

⁶⁰ Isabelle Khurshudyan, Liz Sly, and Adela Suliman, “Crimea Airfield Blast War Work of Ukrainian Special Forces, Official Says,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 2022; and Oren Liebermann, “How Ukraine Is Using Resistance Warfare Developed by the U.S. to Fight Back Against Russia,” CNN, August 27, 2022; Anastasia Tenisheva, “Assassinations of Russia-Installed Officials on the Rise in Occupied Ukraine,” *Moscow Times*, September 1, 2022.

⁶¹ Reuters, “Ukraine Has Struck More Than 400 Russian Targets with HIMARS - U.S. Top General,” September 8, 2022.

⁶² The Russian military must keep large supplies of ammunition close to the frontlines for resupply due to its reliance on artillery. These supplies present a particularly vulnerable and significant target, especially for long-range systems such as HIMARS. Liz Sly, John Hudson, and David L. Stern, “Crimea Attacks Point to Ukraine’s Newest Strategy, Official Says,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2022.

⁶³ Russia constructed multiple lines of defense in preparation for a UAF offensive. Including DNR troops, Russia concentrated a large portion of its remaining VDV and *Spetsnaz* units (however, as demonstrated in the early stages of the invasion, they are often insufficiently equipped to defend against a large conventional force), as well as various other conventional Russian forces. Matthew Luxmoore, “Russia Moves to Reinforce Its Stalled Assault on Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2022.

⁶⁴ Loveday Morris et al., “On the Kherson Front Lines, Little Sign of a Ukrainian Counteroffensive,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2022.

⁶⁵ Jim Sciutto, “Ukrainian Forces Begin ‘Shaping’ Battlefield for Counteroffensive, Senior U.S. Officials Say,” CNN, August 29, 2022.

⁶⁶ E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, “Ukrainian Officials Drew on U.S. Intelligence to Plan Counteroffensive,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2022.

determined opposition, including the heavy use of artillery and air support.⁶⁷ At the same time, the UAF began an offensive on another front, in the northeastern region of Kharkiv.

Kharkiv Offensive

In the Kharkiv region, the UAF appeared to exploit a weak point in Russian defenses and captured several towns (such as Balakliya) in early September 2022, potentially opening the possibility of targeting a key resupply city of Kupyansk. Reports document that Rosgvardiya troops, not trained or equipped for frontline combat, and lower-quality LNR troops staffed Russian positions.⁶⁸ The UAF appeared to consolidate an estimated core of five to six brigades to launch a counteroffensive.⁶⁹ The UAF benefited from Russia pulling its most combat-effective troops south toward Kherson and from apparent Russian intelligence and command failures, as Russia failed to detect the UAF buildup and organize a coordinated response. Spearheaded by tanks and armored vehicles, the UAF quickly exploited its breakthrough with high mobile units that advanced behind Russian forces, conducting ambushes and cutting off Russian reinforcements.⁷⁰ The UAF also launched offensives south of Izyum and Lyman to put pressure on Russian forces, threatening to cut off Russian forces in the area.

By September 10, Russian forces had announced a withdrawal from Izyum, a symbolic statement after a near-total rout of Russian forces in the area. The collapse of Russian forces led to the UAF advancing so quickly that UAF command had trouble keeping track of its units.⁷¹ Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated the offensive had gone “better than expected” and that Ukraine’s focus was on consolidating and defending the recaptured territory.⁷² By September 11, Russia announced it had withdrawn all forces west of the Oskil River, with Ukraine retaking more than 1,000 square miles of territory and almost all previously occupied territory in Kharkiv region.⁷³

During this period, Russian forces continued to disintegrate, including reinforcements such as the 90th Tank Division and the newly created 3rd Army Corps, which were rushed in to stabilize Russian lines.⁷⁴ After recapturing Izyum, the UAF pushed past the Oskil River into Luhansk toward the key hub of Lyman, critical for Russia’s efforts to push further into Donetsk.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ John Hudson, “Wounded Soldiers Reveal Steep Toll of Kherson Offensive,” *Washington Post*, September 7, 2022; Andrew E. Kramer, “For Ukraine, the Fight Is Often a Game of Bridges,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2022.

⁶⁸ Konrad Muzyka, “Ukraine Conflict Monitor, September 6, 2022,” Rochan Consulting, September 7, 2022.

⁶⁹ President Zelensky praised the 25th Airborne Brigade, 80th Air Assault Brigade, and 92nd Mechanized Brigade in a televised speech, but observers noted other units present in the initial offensive. BBC, “Zelensky Hails ‘Good News’ as Settlements Recaptured from Russia,” September 7, 2022.

⁷⁰ Jack Detsch, “They Are Pushing Everywhere: Kyiv Goes on the Offensive,” *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2022; *Economist*, “Ukraine Seizes the Initiative in the East,” September 9, 2022.

⁷¹ *Economist*, “Is Russia on the Run?” September 11, 2022; Mike Eckel, “Turning the Tide? Ukraine Stuns Russia with Counteroffensive but Can’t Claim Victory Yet,” RFE/RL, September 11, 2022.

⁷² Jack Watling, “Ukraine Can Now Exploit Russia’s Confusion, But Must Plan Carefully,” *Guardian*, September 10, 2022.

⁷³ Illia Ponomarenko, “With Successful Kharkiv Operation, Ukraine Turns the War in Its Favor,” *Kyiv Independent*, September 13, 2022.

⁷⁴ Siobhán O’Grady and Anastacia Galouchka, “The Letters Left Behind by Demoralized Russian Soldiers as They Fled,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 2022.

⁷⁵ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Natalia Yermak, “Two Cities, Two Armies: Pivot Points in the Fight in Ukraine’s East,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2022.

Russia's Claimed Annexation of Ukrainian Territories

On September 30, Putin announced that Russia would annex the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhia. The announcement came in the midst of multiple successful Ukrainian military offensives and was declared illegal by most of the international community.⁷⁶ Putin's announcement of the annexation may have been intended to re-affirm Russia's commitment to the war, despite the setbacks, and corresponding to increasing rhetoric by Putin linking the Ukraine conflict to a larger conflict between Russia and the West.⁷⁷ In illegally claiming to annex these regions, Putin ended any immediate prospect of negotiations or a diplomatic solution to the war. By declaring these territories part of Russia, Putin also opened the possibility of deploying conscripts, which are prevented from being forcibly deployed abroad unless a state of war is declared.

Russian Personnel Challenges

In response to heavy casualties and insufficient recruitment, and to defer the official deployment of conscripts to combat, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a "partial mobilization" in September 2022 of 300,000 personnel. The initial mobilization was marked by confusion and a blanket call-up by local and regional officials to meet quotas, instead of a more targeted mobilization of those with recent military experience or technical skills. Putin announced an end to mobilization by late October, but never officially signed a decree ending mobilization. In early December 2022, Putin announced that around 80,000 mobilized personnel were to be deployed in combat units, 70,000 to fulfill support and defensive roles, and 150,000 to conduct training in Russia or Belarus. Also in December, Russia announced several major structural changes to the armed forces, including an increase in the size of the military to 1.5 million personnel (including 695,000 contract personnel) and the creation of new units.

Most analysts agree the only way to achieve this staffing level is through mobilization or an increase in conscription. On September 12, 2022, President Putin stated that 270,000 people voluntarily signed up to join the military over the last six months (in addition to those mobilized) and added that up to 1,500 people join "every day." This is likely a heavily inflated number, and it likely reflects the total number of new personnel rather than those who voluntarily signed contracts, including some mobilized personnel as well as conscripts who were pressured or coerced into signing contracts to serve as professional soldiers. The Russian military also began recruiting prisoners from Russian prisons, copying the practice of the Wagner Group Private Military Company.

Heavy casualties to senior contract soldiers and junior officers continue to hamper the Russian military's ability to train new personnel, since most training is conducted at the unit level by these personnel. Due to the immediate need for reinforcements to stabilize Russian lines, the Russian military sent many mobilized personnel into the frontlines with minimal training and limited equipment. At least a portion of the mobilized personnel underwent further training to either form new units or serve as more capable replacements in reconstituted units. Training of mobilized personnel also has to be coordinated with the spring and fall conscription cycles, further straining Russia's limited capacity to train new recruits.

Despite the hurdles and chaotic nature of the first round of mobilization, Russian authorities began a process of creating more orderly structures and processes for future call-ups and are aware of the potential domestic political implications of new round of mobilization. In order to gain new personnel and defer further mobilization, Russian authorities have turned to a variety of "shadow mobilization" strategies. These strategies combine incentives, such as high salaries and increased benefits, with measures aimed at making evasion or deferment more difficult. Russia has passed a series of legislative changes to increase the pool of available personnel, including electronic conscription summons and the creation of a digital registry, as well as increases in the maximum conscription age to 30 (from 27) and officers to 70 (from 65).

Sources: Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Sends Ill-Trained Draftees Into Combat Amid Losses, Analysts Say," *New York Times*, November 4, 2022; Mike Eckel, "Don't Call It Mobilization: Across Russia, Military Recruiters Send Out New Orders," *RFE/RL*, March 16, 2023; Matthew Luxmoore and Yuliya Chernova, "Russia to Curb Draft-Dodging as It Denies Fresh Mobilization Plans," *Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2023; Thomas Gibbons-Nedd and Natalia Yermak, "'Dig, Dig, Dig': A Russian Soldier's Story," *New York Times*, July 5, 2023; Ivan Nechepurenko,

⁷⁶ White House, "Statement from President Biden on Russia's Attempts to Annex Ukrainian Territory," press release, September 20, 2022.

⁷⁷ Anton Troianovski and Valerie Hopkins, "With Bluster and Threats, Putin Casts the West as the Enemy," *New York Times*, September 30, 2022.

"Russia, Seeking a Bigger Army, Moves to Raise Top Age for Military Service," *New York Times*, July 25, 2023; Johan Norberg, Ismail Khan, and Jonas Kjellen, "Attrition and Regeneration: Russia's Armed Forces at War," in *Russia's War Against Ukraine and the West: The First Year*, ed. Maria Engqvist and Emil Wannheden (FOI, 2023), pp. 65-76; Conflict Intelligence Team, "Mobilization Update, August 3-4," August 4, 2023.

October 2022-March 2023

By early October 2022, the UAF had continued to capitalize on its success and push Russian forces back into Luhansk. The UAF captured the key hub of Lyman, the earlier scene of heavy fighting in May 2022. Russian forces continued to withdraw, leaving significant amounts of military equipment (including tanks and artillery ammunition) that helped propel further UAF offensives.⁷⁸

In contrast to the collapse of Russian forces in Kharkiv, the UAF faced stiff and determined resistance in Kherson. As noted above, Russia had moved some of its most capable remaining forces in preparation for an expected UAF offensive in the south. As Ukrainian forces retook some territory in Kherson region, Russian forces withdrew to prepared defensive lines and imposed heavy UAF casualties. Western security assistance (such as M777 and HIMARS) again proved crucial by giving the UAF long-range strike capabilities to isolate Russian forces by targeting command and control, logistics, and bridges.⁷⁹

At the same time, the UAF continued to demonstrate flexibility and innovation by conducting multiple strikes deep in Russia.⁸⁰ On October 8, Ukraine blew up parts of the Kerch Bridge connecting occupied Crimea and Russia. In response, Russia launched more than 80 missiles and two dozen drones to attack more than 20 Ukrainian cities. Ukraine also attacked Russia's Engels airbase, home to part of its strategic bomber force, twice in December 2022, again demonstrating Ukraine's ability to strike deep inside Russia.⁸¹

By autumn 2022, some battlefield momentum had shifted to Ukraine, and Russia faced the prospect of defeat on multiple fronts. Russian forces suffered from a lack of personnel, dwindling equipment and ammunition stockpiles, and low morale. In the wake of these Russian failures, it is possible that Putin began to receive a more accurate understanding of the state of Russian forces and that Russia's current strategy and conventional forces in Ukraine were insufficient.⁸²

In response, Putin appointed a new commander of the Russian Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine, General Sergei Surovikin, in early October 2022. With a reputation for being a competent, if

⁷⁸ Since the first arrivals of M777 howitzers in April, the UAF increasingly relied on Western artillery and ammunition as its stockpiles of ammunition for its Soviet and Russian era artillery dwindled to critically low levels. The provision of Western artillery systems, and its precision targeting capability, proved decisive in the UAF's ability to support offensive operations. For more, see Marcin Piotrowski, *Military-Technical Assistance to Ukraine: An Assessment of Its Short and Medium-Term Needs*, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw, December 2022; Egle E. Murauskaite, *U.S. Arms Transfers to Ukraine: An Impact Assessment*, Asymmetric Threat Analysis Center: University of Maryland, January 2023.

⁷⁹ Jack Detsch, "Russian Army Keeps Collapsing After Falling Back in Kherson," *Foreign Policy*, October 4, 2022.

⁸⁰ There were previously unexplained explosions and reported attacks on military installations but Ukrainian officials refused to comment.

⁸¹ Veronika Melkozerova, "Drone Attack Hits Russia's Engels Airbase for Second Time in a Month," *Politico.eu*, December 26, 2022.

⁸² Paul Sonne, "Putin Faces Limits of His Military Power as Ukraine Recaptures Land," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2022.

brutal, general, Surovikin's goal was to stem Russian losses and stabilize the frontline.⁸³ To do so, Surovikin adopted a more defensive strategy, including the building of extensive, interlocking defensive lines across southern Ukraine.⁸⁴ Thousands of mobilized personnel were immediately sent to the frontlines, often with limited training and equipment.⁸⁵ Despite their poor quality, these fresh troops allowed Russia to reinforce its lines, and in some cases even rotate and rest units. The commander of Ukraine's armed forces, General Valery Zaluzhny, stated bluntly, "Russian mobilization has worked. It is not true that their problems are so dire that these people will not fight. They will."⁸⁶

Figure 3. Ukraine Airfields and Key Infrastructure



Sources: Created by Congressional Research Service using data from *Janes IHS* as of February 2022.

At the same time, and possibly as a result of growing domestic dissent over the conduct of the war, Russia launched a renewed strike campaign targeting key energy infrastructure across Ukraine (see **Figure 3**). Despite a widespread assessment that Russia's stockpile of long-range precision munitions is running low, Russia continued to launch such attacks (including heavy missile barrages in November and December 2022).⁸⁷ To compensate for its dwindling stockpile and limitations on producing new PGMs, Russia has imported Iranian drones to supplement its precision munition stockpile. The use of cheap, but effective, Iranian drones force Ukrainian air

⁸³ Mark Galeotti, "Putin's Attack Dog Brings a Terrible Type of Warfare to Ukraine," *Spectator*, October 10, 2022.

⁸⁴ Marco Hernandez and Josh Holder, "Defenses Carves into the Earth," *New York Times*, December 14, 2022.

⁸⁵ Mark Galeotti, Pavel Baev, and Graeme P. Herd, "Militaries, Mercenaries, Militias, and Morale and the Ukraine War," Marshall Center, November 15, 2022; Robyn Dixon and Natalia Abbakumova, "Angry Families Say Russian Conscripts Thrown to Front Line Unprepared," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2022.

⁸⁶ Economist, "An Interview with General Valery Zaluzhny, Head of Ukraine's Armed Forces," December 15, 2022.

⁸⁷ Andrew E. Kramer and Megan Specia, "Death Toll of Russian Strike in Dnipro Rises to 40, Ukraine Says," *New York Times*, January 16, 2023.

defenses to expend their limited munitions, potentially presenting a choice to Ukraine of prioritizing air defense of critical infrastructure or its frontline forces.⁸⁸ Additionally, wearing down Ukraine's air defenses would also allow the VKS to operate more freely, in contrast to its current risk averse operations over Ukraine.

In November 2022, Russia announced its withdrawal from the city of Kherson to more defensible lines east of the Dnipro. Russia was able to withdraw some of its most capable units in good order, preserving them for expected offensives in the winter and spring. It appears Putin relented to withdrawing from Kherson after reportedly refusing the Russian military's requests for months to retreat from its exposed positions there.⁸⁹

Figure 4. Ukraine Territorial Control, Winter 2022-2023



Source: Created by Congressional Research Service using data from U.S. Department of State, Global Admin, and ESRI.

Note: Lines of territorial control are approximate.

With the establishment of more defensible lines and the introduction of new mobilized personnel, Russia was able to stabilize its lines, including blunting further UAF offenses to seize the key cities of Kreminna and Svatove in Luhansk.⁹⁰ Most fighting soon became attritional, with a relatively warm winter limiting the ability of either side to conduct rapid offensive maneuvers due

⁸⁸ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "Russia Trying to Exhaust Ukraine's Air Defenses, Pentagon Official Says," Reuters, November 19, 2022; CRS Insight IN12042, *Iran's Transfer of Weaponry to Russia for Use in Ukraine*, by Andrew S. Bowen, Carla E. Humud, and Clayton Thomas.

⁸⁹ Mike Eckel, "Bad News Politically, Shrewd Move Militarily? What Russia's Kherson Retreat Means—And What It Doesn't," *RFE/RL*, November 10, 2022.

⁹⁰ Borys Sachalko, "We Fight With Our Brains. They Fight With Numbers': Ukrainian Paratroopers On The Battle For The Donbas City of Kreminna," *RFE/RL*, December 28, 2022.

to wet and muddy terrain.⁹¹ Russian tactics adapted, with Russian forces conducting probing attacks to identify and fix UAF positions, which are then attacked by smaller, professional units. Russian forces also adapted to the introduction of HIMARS and other precision strike weapons by dispersing logistics and command and control centers, as well as by making more effective use of electronic warfare.⁹²

After only three months, Surovikin was replaced by Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov in early January 2023. The replacement came despite a widespread assessment that Surovikin was one of Russia's most capable commanders; he was largely credited with stabilizing Russian lines in the wake of successful Ukrainian offensives. There was some debate that the replacement of Surovikin may have demonstrated continued unrealistic battlefield expectations of Russian political decisionmakers.⁹³ While it is possible Putin began getting more accurate information on the state of the Russian military, Russian rhetoric and stated goals suggest there continued to be a mismatch between expectations and available resources.⁹⁴ Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines noted in December 2022, "I do think he [Putin] is becoming more informed of the challenges that the military faces in Russia, but it's still not clear to us that he has a full picture at this stage of just how challenged they are."⁹⁵

After Russia's withdrawal from Kherson city, both sides focused on reconstituting forces and stockpiling equipment and ammunition in preparation for expected spring offensives.⁹⁶ In December 2022, Commander in Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Valery Zaluzhny stated, "It's more important to focus on the accumulation of resources right now for the more protracted and heavier battles that may begin next year."⁹⁷ Also in December, the United States announced it would begin conducting combined arms training of UAF units, including the training of battalion and brigade level staff to manage operations (for more information see "New Ukrainian Units for Counteroffensive" text box below). The United States and Western allies also committed to supply Ukraine with a variety of armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, and a large number of Western tanks (primarily Leopard-variant main battle tanks).⁹⁸ Officials hoped that by combining advanced training with new Western tanks and armored vehicles, the UAF would gain the ability to conduct more effective offensive operations with fewer casualties.⁹⁹

⁹¹ Franz-Stefan Gady and Michael Kofman, "Ukraine's Strategy of Attrition," *Survival*, vol. 65, no. 2 (2023), pp. 7-22.

⁹² Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine*, RUSI, May 19, 2023.

⁹³ Francesca Ebel, "Russia's New Commander Reflects Putin's Plan to Push for Victory in Ukraine," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2022.

⁹⁴ Evan Gershkovich et al., "Putin, Isolated and Distrustful, Leans on Handful of Hard-Line Advisers," *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2022.

⁹⁵ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Fireside Chat with DNI Haines at the Reagan National Defense Forum," transcript, December 12, 2022.

⁹⁶ Marita Maloney, "Kyiv Says Russia Planning Major Ground Offensive in New Year," BBC, December 16, 2022.

⁹⁷ Economist, "An Interview with General Valery Zaluzhny, Head of Ukraine's Armed Forces," December 15, 2022.

⁹⁸ Department of Defense, "Biden Administration Announces Additional Security Assistance for Ukraine," press release, January 25, 2023; Todd Prince, "Western Tanks a 'Vital Part of Recipe' as Ukraine Seeks to Drive Out Russian Forces," *RFE/RL*, January 26, 2023.

⁹⁹ Eric Schmitt and Andrew E. Kramer, "U.S. Will Train More Ukrainian Troops, Adding Advanced Battle Tactics," *New York Times*, December 15, 2022; Department of Defense, "More Than \$3 Billion in Additional Security Assistance for Ukraine," press release, January 6, 2023; Steven Erlanger et al. "Ukraine's Allies Pledge to Send Major Infusion of Military Aid," *New York Times*, January 16, 2023.

New Ukrainian Units for Counteroffensive

Along with providing Ukraine with weapons, the United States and allied partners committed in December 2022 to training new Ukrainian units to be used as the spearhead of the counteroffensive that was launched in summer 2023. Nine UAF brigades (of roughly 3,500-4,000 troops each) were trained and equipped by Western partners, with another three equipped by Ukraine. In addition to these 12 brigades, Ukraine organized 9 brigades in the Ministry of Internal Affairs; these units are under the command of the military and act in support of the UAF. Seven of the Internal Affairs brigades are from the National Guard, and one each is from the National Police and Border Guards. Although more lightly equipped than regular UAF brigades, many of these brigades have extensive combat experience.

Western training has consisted of two primary components. The first component has been training Ukrainian units on Western equipment, such as infantry or armored fighting vehicles (IFV/AFV) like the Bradley IFV. Rather than spreading the new equipment across the UAF, particular systems were deployed to selected units to increase familiarity and competency.

The second component has focused on transitioning the UAF toward NATO-style combined arms operations and away from its Soviet military legacy. Combined arms operations are the joint employment of capabilities from each combat branch (artillery, armored, infantry, etc.) to operate simultaneously instead of individually and sequentially. Western officials maintained that training in combined arms operations would enable the UAF to maximize the capabilities provided by new security assistance and help breach entrenched Russian forces.

Western training efforts have faced several hurdles. First, almost all the personnel of the new UAF units are new recruits rather than experienced personnel. As such, they must first be taught basic infantry skills. Second, combined arms operations are complex and difficult. In general, Western militaries train units for several months on combined arms operations, whereas new Ukrainian armed forces units were given only several weeks of training. Finally, despite the initial steps to transition toward NATO-style doctrine, the UAF is still primarily reliant on Soviet-style command and control, especially when organizing higher-level operations.

Sources: Ukrinform, “New Units Created in Armed Forces of Ukraine to Be Equipped with New Western Equipment,” January 23, 2023; Natasha Bertrand, Alex Marquardt, and Katie Bo Lillis, “The U.S. and Its Allies Want Ukraine to Change Its Battlefield Tactics in the Spring,” CNN, January 24, 2023; Daniel Michaels and Nancy A. Yousef, “Ukraine’s Troops Will Need Fewer Bullets and Shells After Training, U.S. Hopes,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 2023; Ukrinform, “Year Behind the Scenes: Interview with Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valery Zaluzhny,” May 12, 2023; Erik Kramer and Paul Schneider, “What the Ukrainian Armed Forces Need to Do to Win,” *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2023; and Isobel Koshiw, “NATO Training Leaves Ukrainian Troops ‘Underprepared’ for War,” *openDemocracy*, August 8, 2023.

Beginning in January 2023, Russia launched a number of local offensives in the south (around Vuhledar), continued offensives to seize Bakhmut, and conducted a counterattack in Luhansk around Kreminna rather than continuing the defensive strategy that General Surovikin had established.¹⁰⁰ Initially, it was unclear whether these offensives were probing attacks or the early part of an expected spring offensive.¹⁰¹ It soon became apparent, however, that these were Russia’s main offensives and not preparatory attacks, with Russia committing many of its remaining professional units (such as the VDV and Naval Infantry), equipment, and ammunition. Russia’s mobilization helped remedy its urgent need for personnel and stabilized its lines, but it only provided enough personnel to replenish losses, not create new units. Additionally, most of these personnel were rushed to the frontlines with little training or preparation for offensive operations and with limited leadership due to heavy casualties among junior officers.¹⁰² Russia

¹⁰⁰ Marc Santora, Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Shashank Bengali, “Russia Pays a Bloody Price for Small Gains on Eastern Front,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2023; Isabel Coles and Evan Gershkovich, “Russia Pushes on Several Fronts in Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2023; Mike Eckel, “Russia’s New Offensive Grinds Into Action As Ukraine Punches Back Hard,” *RFE/RL*, February 11, 2023.

¹⁰¹ Marc Santora, “Russia’s Losses Around Vuhledar Renew Questions About Its Ability to Sustain a Fresh Offensive,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2023.

¹⁰² Isabel Coles and Thomas Grove, “Russia’s New Offensive in Ukraine Exposes Blunders, Poor Training,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2023.

failed to overcome UAF resistance and suffered heavy casualties, partly due to relying on frontal attacks and other previously unsuccessful strategies.¹⁰³

The timing of Russia's offensive was questionable and possibly a result of impatience on the part of the Russian leadership.¹⁰⁴ The appointment of Gerasimov likely indicated his willingness to launch offensive operations regardless of the state of the military. The Russian leadership also likely sought to achieve some territorial gains before promised Western security assistance (such as new Western tanks) were deployed on the battlefield.¹⁰⁵ By launching its main offensive early, Russia expended valuable personnel, equipment, and ammunition it may need in the spring to defend against Ukraine's expected counteroffensive.¹⁰⁶

Despite the failure of Russia's winter offensive, some Western officials remained skeptical of the UAF's ability to decisively defeat the Russian military in the near future.¹⁰⁷ During a January 2023 press conference, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General Milley stated, "So from a military standpoint, I still maintain that for this year it would be very, very difficult to militarily eject the Russian forces.... That doesn't mean it can't happen; doesn't mean it won't happen, but it'd be very, very difficult."¹⁰⁸

April 2023-Fall 2023

In spring 2023, momentum continued to swing in Ukraine's favor, as the UAF demonstrated significant flexibility and resilience defending against Russian offensives. After Russia expended most of what offensive potential remained during its winter offensive, both sides concentrated on Bakhmut, where the Wagner Group PMC led a brutal fight to capture the symbolically important town from Ukraine (see text box below).¹⁰⁹

Battle for Bakhmut

Bakhmut and its surrounding settlements have been the scene of intense fighting since summer 2022, much of it led on the Russian side by the Wagner Group Private Military Company (PMC). Analysts continue to debate the value of Bakhmut, generally agreeing it has tactical utility but little strategic importance. Both sides appeared to focus on the symbolic importance of the city, with Russia seeking to present its capture as part of its pledge to capture the entire Donetsk region and Ukraine seeking to demonstrate its determination to defend all of its territory.

¹⁰³ For example, Russia's elite 155th and 40th Marine Infantry Brigades suffered heavy casualties and lost "dozens" of tanks and armored personnel carriers in repeated frontal assaults against well entrenched UAF positions. Colonel General Rustam Muradov, then head of the Eastern Military District and in command of the Vuhledar assault, was reportedly dismissed in response. Mike Eckel, "What Happened In Vuhledar? A Battle Points to Major Russian Military Problems," *RFE/RL*, February 17, 2023; Andrew E. Kramer, "In an Epic Battle of Tanks, Russia Was Routed, Repeating Earlier Mistakes," *New York Times*, March 1, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Josh Holder and Marco Hernandez, "How Russia's Offensive Ran Aground," *New York Times*, April 6, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Grove and Benoit Faucon, "Russia Aims to Regain Offensive in Ukraine War With New Commander," *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Marc Santora, Matthew Mpoke Bigg and Richard Pérez-Peña, "Russian Attacks Along a Wide Arc of Ukraine Yield Little but Casualties," *New York Times*, March 13, 2023; Riley Bailey et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 1," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 1, 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Yaroslav Trofimov, "Ukraine, Russia Gird for a Decisive Spring Campaign After a Bloody Winter," *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and General Mark A. Milley Press Conference Following Ukraine Defense Contact Group Meeting, Ramstein Air Base, Germany," press release, January 20, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Josh Holder and Marco Hernandez, "How Russia's Offensive Ran Aground," *New York Times*, April 6, 2023.

In the struggle for Bakhmut, the Wagner Group PMC and its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin sought to increase their stature by presenting the Wagner Group PMC as a more capable and competent fighting force than the Russian military. Reports indicated that Prigozhin viewed the capture of Bakhmut as a way to increase his standing with the Russian leadership and establish Wagner's standing as an independent institution within Russia. To compensate for reduced artillery support, Wagner relied on overwhelming manpower to wear down the UAF. Wagner recruited heavily from prisons and used those prisoners in massed human wave attacks, suffering heavy casualties in the process.

Instead of withdrawing, the UAF devoted considerable resources—including some of its best and most experienced units, along with Territorial Defense Forces units—to defending Bakhmut. The UAF and Ukrainian leadership believed that defending Bakhmut could impose attrition on Russian forces and create a favorable balance of forces for when the UAF launched its counteroffensive. Although the attrition ratio was likely in Ukraine's favor, Russian casualties largely consisted of convicts recruited from prisons, whereas UAF losses consisted of some of its most experienced troops.

Over the course of nine months, the intensity and focus of each side converged on Bakhmut, as Russia's offensives in other parts of Ukraine failed to achieve much success through early 2023. Wagner forces received logistic and other support from Russian forces (including some VDV units fighting alongside Wagner), but tension between Prigozhin and the Russian military leadership continued to grow as Prigozhin claimed credit for any success. By May 2023, Wagner forces gained ground on the heights surrounding Bakhmut and steadily forced the UAF to withdraw to the city's outskirts. Prigozhin announced the capture of Bakhmut at the end of May and stated that the Wagner Group would hand over control of the city to regular Russian forces.

Sources: Andrew E. Kramer, "Our Losses Were Gigantic: Life in a Sacrificial Russian Assault Wave," *New York Times*, February 12, 2023; Isabelle Khurshudyan, Paul Sonne and Karen DeYoung, "Ukraine Short of Skilled Troops and Munitions as Losses, Pessimism Grows," *Washington Post*, March 13, 2023; Matthew Luxmoore and Ievgeniia Sivorka, "Ukraine's Leadership Doubles Down on Bakhmut Defense as Russians Get Closer," *Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 2023; Marcus Walker, "Ukraine Sees Russian Losses in Bakhmut as Paving Way for Spring Offensive," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2023; Siobhán O'Grady, Kamila Hrabchuk and Kostiantyn Khudov, "How Ukrainian Forces Denied Russia Victory in Bakhmut by Victory Day," *Washington Post*, May 12, 2023; Rochan Consulting, "Issue 312: 15 May-21 May Weekly Update," May 22, 2023; Jen Kirby, "The Longest Battle of the Ukraine War Might Finally Be Over," *Vox*, May 22, 2023; Kateryna Stepanenko, "The Kremlin's Pyrrhic Victory in Bakhmut: A Retrospective on the Battle for Bakhmut," *Institute for the Study of War*, May 24, 2023.

While fighting continued in and around Bakhmut, both sides continued to reconstitute their forces and Russia continued to reinforce its defenses in southern Ukraine, specifically Ukraine's occupied Zaporizhia region.¹¹⁰ Russia also continued a sustained missile and drone strike campaign, mainly targeting key urban and civilian infrastructure centers. These strikes forced the UAF to divert and expend critical air defense assets away from the frontline to protect urban centers, a possible goal of the Russian strikes.¹¹¹ If Ukraine's air defenses were exhausted, it could allow the VKS to operate freely over Ukraine.¹¹² Ukrainian defenses were bolstered by the deployment of advanced Western air defense systems, including U.S.-supplied Patriot systems.¹¹³

Ukrainian forces also began a series of attacks and operations meant to destabilize Russian forces ahead of Ukraine's expected offensive. The UAF and Ukrainian intelligence units began

¹¹⁰ Anastasia Stognei, Polina Ivanova, and Christopher Miller, "Russia and Ukraine Tighten Conscription Rules Ahead of Spring Hostilities," *Financial Times*, April 11, 2023.

¹¹¹ Adam Durbin and James Landale, "Russia Launches Ninth Wave of Missile Attacks on Kyiv This Month," BBC, May 18, 2023; Aleksander Palikot, "Ukraine Parries as Russia Seeks to Slow Counteroffensive with New Surge of Attacks," *RFE/RL*, May 25, 2023.

¹¹² According to one analyst, "the threat that the VKS can pose to Ukraine in the ongoing war is almost entirely dependent on whether Ukraine can sustain its [ground-based air defense] coverage near the frontlines," Justin Bronk, *Russian Combat Air Strengths and Limitations: Lessons from Ukraine*, Center for Naval Analyses, April 2023, p. 16.

¹¹³ Alex Horton, "These are the Western Air Defense Systems Protecting Ukraine," *Washington Post*, May 19, 2023; CRS In Focus IF12297, *PATRIOT Air and Missile Defense System for Ukraine*, by Andrew Feickert. For more on Russia's strike campaign, see Ian Williams, *Putin's Missile War: Russia's Strike Campaign in Ukraine*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), May 2023.

conducting strikes deep inside occupied Ukraine and Russia. The United Kingdom provided Ukraine with a long-range precision missile, Storm Shadow, which the Ukrainian Air Force began using to attack key targets.¹¹⁴ Storm Shadow—and eventually the French version SCALP-EG—allowed Ukraine to target Russian command and logistics centers which had been dispersed after the introduction of HIMARS during summer 2022.¹¹⁵ In May 2023, two volunteer units of Russian citizens backed and supported by Ukraine conducted a series of raids into Russia's southern Belgorod region, briefly capturing several villages. Ukraine also began what would become a series of drone attacks against Moscow, including the Kremlin.¹¹⁶

The UAF began probing Russian defensive lines, searching for weak points, and attempting to keep Russian forces guessing about Ukrainian intentions ahead of the looming counteroffensive.¹¹⁷ The UAF's new Western-trained and equipped units would form the spearhead of its counteroffensive, hoping to breach Russian defenses which could then be exploited by reserve units. While the UAF has demonstrated that it can be an effective defending force, it was unclear whether it could manage large-scale offensive operations against an entrenched Russian military. As noted above (see “New Ukrainian Units for Counteroffensive” box above), the training and cohesion of these new units was uncertain, as most recruits had little to no combat experience.¹¹⁸ Additionally, the UAF would rely heavily on artillery to support advances, and it was unclear whether the new units had enough minefield breaching equipment or sufficient training to break through Russian defensive lines.¹¹⁹

Russian forces began regrouping after their disastrous winter offensive, a task made easier with the Wagner Group PMC leading the battle for Bakhmut. The Russian military no longer appears to be operating BTGs; what professional units remain appear to operate as Company Tactical Groups and are deployed as mobile reserves or strike groups. To conduct offensive operations, Russia reorganized many of its units as “assault detachments,” which are smaller subunits created to attack and capture Ukrainian positions.¹²⁰ Due to casualties, however, almost every Russian unit is likely either fully or partially composed of mobilized personnel with varying degrees of competency and training.¹²¹

¹¹⁴ Jim Sciutto, “Britain Has Delivered Long-Range ‘Storm Shadow’ Cruise Missiles to Ukraine Ahead of Expected Counteroffensive, Sources Say,” CNN, May 12, 2023; Isabel Coles, “Ukraine Launches Airstrikes on Russian-Held Targets,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2023.

¹¹⁵ In addition to operational adaptations such as dispersing command and control and logistics, Russia also adjusted its use of electronic warfare to mitigate HIMARS. Alex Marquardt, Natasha Bertrand, and Zachary Cohen, “Russia’s Jamming of U.S. Provided Rocket Systems Complicates Ukraine’s War Effort,” CNN, May 6, 2023.

¹¹⁶ Matthew Luxmoore and Georgi Kantchev, “Ukrainian-Backed Troops Stage Cross-Border Incursion Into Russia,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2023; Elsa Court, “From Moscow to Novorossiysk: The List of Attacks on Russian Soil,” *Kyiv Independent*, August 5, 2023.

¹¹⁷ Jack Detsch, “Ukraine Begins Pre-Offensive Probe of Russian Lines,” *Foreign Policy*, May 18, 2023.

¹¹⁸ Ian Lovette and Nikita Nikolaienko, “Ukraine Races to Forge New Army Ahead of Offensive,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2023; Isabelle Khurshudyan and Kamila Hrabchuk, “NATO-Trained Units Will Serve as Tip of Spear in Ukraine’s Counteroffensive,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Ukrainian officials also criticized the slow delivery of promised security assistance, stating slow deliveries were postponing the counteroffensive. Hugo Bachega, “Zelensky Says Ukraine Needs More Time for Counteroffensive,” BBC, May 11, 2023.

¹²⁰ Lester W Grau and Charles K Bartles, “The Russian Breakthrough Tactical Group,” *Infantry*, vol. 111, no. 3 (Fall 2022), pp. 14–17; Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine*, RUSI, May 19, 2023, pp. 5-8.

¹²¹ Specifically, remaining VDV units appear to be the Russian military’s primary strike group element. Additionally, Russia increasingly relies on dismounted infantry, without tank or armored fighting vehicle support, in contrast to the early phases of the war, possibly due to heavy equipment losses as well as the need to conserve equipment for possible (continued...)

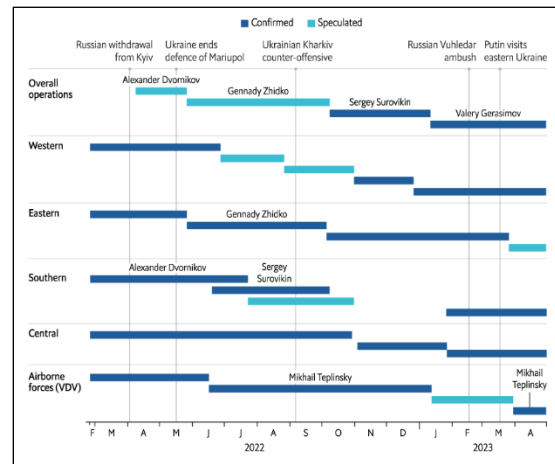
The Russian military continued to suffer from command-and-control issues, with an apparent disconnect between commanders on the ground and senior leaders in Moscow, which has likely contributed to the continued turnover of Russian commanders in Ukraine (see **Figure 5**). Russia continued to replace senior officers.¹²² Additionally, complaints from Russian soldiers continued to surface on social media sites, criticizing a lack of equipment and poor leadership.¹²³ This turmoil highlighted the lack of communication and coordination among the senior leadership and local commanders. Instability in Russian command and control threatened to hamper Russian military effectiveness and allow the UAF to exploit the lack of communication.¹²⁴

Expectations for a UAF counteroffensive grew throughout May. Some argued these expectations ignored the likely reality of a difficult fight ahead. Ukrainian and Western officials recognized the difficulties posed by Russia's defensive fortifications.¹²⁵ Ukraine's leadership appeared to be under pressure to demonstrate it could use Western security assistance to defeat Russian forces. Some Western and Ukrainian officials feared that without success, support for Ukraine could wane and pressure for Ukraine to negotiate with Russia could increase.¹²⁶

Ukraine's Summer 2023 Counteroffensive

Ukraine's long-anticipated counteroffensive to retake Russian-occupied territory in southern and eastern Ukraine began in early June 2023 but has run into heavier-than-expected resistance, forcing the UAF to adjust tactics and achieve incremental gains against fortified Russian lines. Both Russia and Ukraine continue to experience heavy casualties, equipment losses, and the depletion of artillery ammunition. The ability to rotate, replenish, and reconstitute forces will likely influence each side's ability to sustain operations.¹²⁷ For the UAF, the ability to

Figure 5. Russian Command and Control in Ukraine



Source: *Economist*, "Why Have Russia's Armed Forces Been So Ineffective in Ukraine," May 15, 2023.

future offensives. Mark Urban, "The Cost of the Ukraine War for One Russian Regiment," *BBC*, April 6, 2023; Alex Horton, "Russia's Commando Units Gutted by Ukraine War," *Washington Post*, April 14, 2023; Mary Ilyushina, "Russia Needs More Troops But is Wary of Public Anger, Leaked Documents Say," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2023.

¹²² Reportedly, this includes Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, Commander of the VDV, who was relieved of command in January but reinstated in April due to his reputation as an effective and capable commander. Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 16, 2023," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 16, 2023.

¹²³ Meduza, "Sent There to Be Meat: Why Russian Draftees Are Suddenly Publishing so Many Video Please to Putin," March 9, 2023.

¹²⁴ Paul Sonne and Anton Troianovski, "As Ukrainian Attack Looms, Putin Faces Setbacks and Disunity in Russian Forces," *New York Times*, May 16, 2023.

¹²⁵ Adam Taylor, Anastacia Galouchka and Serhiy Morguno, "To Liberate Territory, Ukraine Must Smash Fortified Russian Defenses," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2023.

¹²⁶ Julian E. Barnes et al., "Ukraine's Spring Offensive Comes With Immense Stakes for Future of the War," *New York Times*, April 24, 2023; Jonathan Lemire and Alexander Ward, "Biden's Team Fears the Aftermath of a Failed Ukrainian Counteroffensive," *Politico*, April 24, 2023.

¹²⁷ For more on the initial phases of the counteroffensive, see Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, "Perseverance and Adaptation: Ukraine's Counteroffensive at Three Months," *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2023; Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *Stormbreak: Fighting Through Russian Defenses in Ukraine's 2023 Offensive*, RUSI, September 2023.

concentrate enough forces with sufficient support will likely affect future success of its offensive, especially as Russia continues attempting to draw UAF forces away from the south by launching attacks in Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv and Luhansk regions.¹²⁸

Toward the end of May 2023, the UAF made some gains around the flanks of Bakhmut, pushing back Russian forces. Ukraine's 3rd Separate Assault Brigade broke through a series of Russian lines, exploiting gaps and an apparent lack of coordination between withdrawing Wagner Group PMC and Russian army units.¹²⁹ Ukraine continued probing and harassing Russian forces, including via incursions into the Russian city of Belgorod, near the Ukrainian border, and increased artillery and long-range strikes to destabilize Russian forces and mask the focus of the counteroffensive.¹³⁰

In early June, the UAF began a series of attacks across southern Ukraine. These operations were part of Ukraine's main counteroffensive, with the UAF committing some of its new Western-trained and -equipped units.¹³¹ To date, the counteroffensive has targeted three axes of advance: south (Orikhiv-Tokmak), southeast (Velyka-Novosilka), and east (Bakhmut).¹³² The UAF also probed Russian lines further west on the Dnipro River in the Kherson region, threatening a potential attack across the river that could force Russia to withdraw forces elsewhere on the frontlines. Subsequently, Russia allegedly blew up Ukraine's Kakhovka dam, flooding vast swathes of the lower Kherson region and making it nearly impossible for the UAF to conduct a bridging operation for the immediate future.¹³³

Ukraine's counteroffensive ran into immediate Russian resistance and reportedly suffered heavy casualties, including losses of newly-supplied Western tanks and infantry fighting vehicles.¹³⁴ U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III stated at the outset of the offensive, "There will be stops and starts. There will be things that happen that [the] Ukrainians didn't anticipate. There will be opportunities for the Ukrainians to exploit."¹³⁵ Most initial assaults consisted of battalion-level or smaller units as the UAF struggled to implement larger combined arms strategies and coordination. Especially challenging for Ukrainian forces has been the need to breach Russia's extensive minefields. Ukraine's minefield breaching equipment has become a key target for Russian forces.¹³⁶

¹²⁸ Rochan Consulting, "Issue 323, August 5-August 11, 2023," August 11, 2023.

¹²⁹ Marc Santora, "Gains Near Bakhmut Raise Ukraine's Hopes of a Turning Tide," *New York Times*, May 17, 2023; John Paul Rathbone et al., "Ukraine's Daring 'Shaping Operations' Stretch Russian Defenses," *Financial Times*, May 30, 2023.

¹³⁰ Julian Borger, "The Intensity is Increasing: Ukraine Says First Steps in Counteroffensive Have Begun," *Guardian*, May 27, 2023.

¹³¹ The UAF established the 9th and 10th corps to oversee these new units, as well as the TDF, Offensive Guard, and other units involved in the counteroffensive. The UAF also committed other, more experienced units pulled from other fronts to support the offensive.

¹³² Economist, "Ukraine's Counteroffensive is Gathering Pace," June 7, 2023; Rochan Consulting, "The Operational-Strategic Situation in Southern Ukraine," June 14, 2023.

¹³³ Andrew E. Kramer, "Dam's Destruction Reshapes Ukraine, but Not Arc of the War," *New York Times*, June 9, 2023; James Glanz et al., "Why the Evidence Suggests Russia Blew Up the Kakhovka Dam," *New York Times*, June 16, 2023.

¹³⁴ Ian Lovett, Marcus Walker, and Matthew Luxmoore, "Ukraine's Offensive Begins With Ground Gained, Tanks Lost," *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2023.

¹³⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, "Austin Talks Uncertainties of War as Ukraine Prepares Counteroffensive," DoD News, June 5, 2023.

¹³⁶ Jack Watling, "Ukraine's Counteroffensive Begins: Shall the Leopards Break Free," *RUSI*, June 14, 2023.

Figure 6. Southern Ukraine Territorial Control
As of August 17, 2023



Source: Created by CRS using data from U.S. Department of State, Global Admin, and ESRI. Lines of territorial control are approximate using data from the Institute for the Study of War.

Russian forces have demonstrated a high level of tactical flexibility and the ability to learn and adapt.¹³⁷ Despite reported low morale, Russian forces continue to put up resistance and conduct effective operations to counter UAF assaults. Many of the Russian units in and around the Orikhiv-Tokmak axis are from Russia's 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA), which has remained effective and capable and has not experienced the same levels of attrition as other Russian forces. Russian forces appear to leverage the extensive fortifications and minefields prepared before the offensive and seek to draw in and ambush UAF forces, only then withdrawing to other prepared defensive positions, supported by artillery, anti-tank teams, and helicopters to attack UAF mechanized formations.¹³⁸

The UAF has gradually made incremental gains, seizing small towns and pushing Russian forces past their initial defensive lines in southern Ukraine. Some of Ukraine's biggest gains have come around Bakhmut, where the UAF has continued to press Russian forces on the outskirts of the town. Ukraine also has sought to exploit the confusion and chaos of Russia's Wagner Group

¹³⁷ This adaptation is generally reactive rather than proactive and most often comes after costly setbacks to Russian forces. Adaptation also is not uniform across the Russian military, with some branches such as the VDV demonstrating a higher propensity to adjust operations to battlefield conditions. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Julian E. Barnes and Natalia Yermak, "Russia, Learning From Costly Mistakes, Shifts Battlefield Tactics," *New York Times*, June 17, 2023.

¹³⁸ Thomas Newdick and Tyler Rogoway, "Ukraine's Armor Appears To Have A Russian Attack Helicopter Problem," *The Drive*, June 15, 2023; Marcus Walker, "Mines Everywhere': Ukraine's Offensive Is Proving a Hard Slog," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2023.

mutiny in late June 2023 (see Wagner Group Mutiny text box below), which has further exposed chaos and confusion in Russian command and control.¹³⁹

Wagner Group Mutiny

On June 23, 2023, Russia's Wagner Group and its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, launched the most serious challenge yet to Russian President Vladimir Putin's rule. The mutiny followed worsening tensions between Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defense (MoD), specifically Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. Prigozhin accused the military leadership in a video of fabricating the pretext for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and killing troops unnecessarily—including attacking Wagner units. Some observers speculate Prigozhin's video and the subsequent escalation was initially an attempt to preempt the demand that all "volunteer" formations sign contracts with the Russian MoD, effectively ending the Wagner Group's autonomy. Russian authorities issued an arrest warrant for "incitement to armed rebellion" for Prigozhin shortly after midnight on June 24.

Initially, it appeared Prigozhin and the remnants of the Wagner Group would oversee, and possibly expand, its foreign operations—specifically in Africa. However, Prigozhin, along with several key Wagner Group commanders, was killed when a private plane exploded in Russia on August 23, 2023. Russian officials soon visited several countries with Wagner Group deployments, demonstrating continued Russian support for private military company (PMC) operations—albeit under new command structures. Russian security services appear to be competing for control of Wagner's foreign operations, but the exact structure and oversight of these operations remains unclear. Several other Russian PMCs appear to be positioning themselves to take control of Wagner's foreign operations, but they are less independent than the Wagner Group and likely would operate under closer Russian intelligence control.

The mutiny also highlighted the fractious and divided nature of Russian command and control, with Russia reportedly arresting or dismissing various key military officers for actual or tacit support of the mutiny. Russian authorities have been quick to dismiss such accusations, but key commanders—including General Surovkin—appear to have been removed from command. The mutiny has likely increased the demand for loyalty to the Russian political leadership, rather than effectiveness among its military commanders.

Sources: Dara Massicot, "All Is Not Well on Russian Front Lines," *New York Times*, July 19, 2023; Simon Sebag Montefiore, "Putin's Fear of Strong Generals Is as Old as Russia Itself," *Foreign Policy*, July 19, 2023; Jack Margolin, "The New Russian Mercenary Marketplace," *Riddle*, August 21, 2023; Max Seddon and Courtney Weaver, "A Signal for the Whole Elite: The Demise of Yevgeny Prigozhin," *Financial Times*, August 23, 2023; Matthew Luzmoore and Benoit Faucon, "Russian Private Military Companies Move to Take Over Wagner Fighters," *Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2023; Anton Troianovski et. al, "After Prigozhin's Death, a High-Stakes Scramble for His Empire," *New York Times*, September 8, 2023; CRS Insight IN12186, *Wagner Group Mutiny in Russia*, by Andrew S. Bowen; CRS In Focus IF12344, *Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)*, by Andrew S. Bowen; CRS In Focus IF12389, *Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Alexis Arieff.

Ukraine's strategy for rapidly breaching and exploiting Russia's defensive lines did not succeed.¹⁴⁰ Rather than ceding ground and gradually imposing attrition on the UAF, the Russian military decided to deploy its forces to defend its initial fortified lines.¹⁴¹ While this strategy forced the UAF to allocate more units and resources than anticipated, it also committed Russian forces to the initial defense rather than preserving units in reserve to counterattack against a possible breakthrough. Additionally, despite the confusion and distraction caused by the Wagner Group mutiny, Russian forces were able to launch a series of attacks in Ukraine's northern Luhansk and Kharkiv regions. These attacks made minimal gains but succeeded in diverting some

¹³⁹ Russia removed Major General Ivan Popov, head of the 58th CAA, for criticizing the conduct of the war and senior Russian leaders. Matthew Luxmoore, "Ukraine Gains Territory as Russia Grapples with Wagner's Aborted Mutiny," *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2023; Paul Sonne and Anatoly Kurmanav, "Russian General Denounces His Bosses as Officers Are Fired or Questioned," *New York Times*, July 13, 2023; and Laura Seligman, "Russian Command Structure 'Confusing at Best' after Wagner Mutiny, Says Top U.S. General," *Politico*, July 18, 2023.

¹⁴⁰ Barry R. Posen, "Ukraine Has a Breakthrough Problem," *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2023; and Jen Kirby, "What Went Wrong in Ukraine's Counteroffensive," *Vox*, August 8, 2023.

¹⁴¹ Kofman and Lee, "Perseverance and Adaptation."

focus and units away from Ukraine's counteroffensive in the south.¹⁴² By late June, the UAF announced an operational pause to re-group and adjust tactics in the face of stiff Russian resistance.¹⁴³ According to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley,

Right now, [the Ukrainians] are preserving their combat power and they are slowly and deliberately and steadily working their way through all these minefields ... It is far from a failure, in my view ... And I'll stay with what we've said before, this is going to be long, it's going to be hard, it's going to be bloody. And at the end of the day, we'll see where the Ukrainians end up, vis-à-vis the Russians.¹⁴⁴

Much of the fighting also focused on artillery duels, with each side attempting to target and destroy opposing artillery and rocket artillery. Artillery is also a central part of the UAF's new, adjusted counteroffensive strategy. The UAF is leveraging some advantages in range and precision as it gradually seeks to destroy supply lines and isolate Russian forces.¹⁴⁵ Due to the heavy volume of artillery use, ensuring the UAF has sufficient artillery ammunition has been a focus of Western assistance. To continue providing Ukraine immediate supplies of artillery ammunition, the Biden Administration decided in July to provide cluster munitions, or Dual-Purpose Improved Conventional Munition (DPICM).¹⁴⁶

In addition to employing longer-range artillery and precision munitions to isolate Russian forces, Ukraine has increased its use of asymmetric attacks, including inside Russia. Ukraine continues to launch drone attacks against Moscow—targeting airfields, military infrastructure, and central Moscow itself—and naval drones that have attacked ships in Russian ports.¹⁴⁷ The UAF also has continued targeting the bridges connecting Crimea with Russia and conducted special forces raids across the Dnipro River into the Kherson region.¹⁴⁸

Ukraine's counteroffensive soon bogged down in an attritional fight, forcing the UAF to adjust its approach as progress stalled and casualties increased. Ukrainian President Zelensky admitted progress was "probably slower than anyone wants."¹⁴⁹ Rather than continuing to conduct rapid maneuver operations, the UAF has returned to familiar strategies, such as small unit attacks and

¹⁴² Francesca Ebel and Kamila Hrabchuk, "On This Part of the Eastern Front, Russia Is Still on the Attack," *Washington Post*, June 28, 2023; and Rochan Consulting, "Issue 318, June 24-June 30, 2023," July 1, 2023.

¹⁴³ Grace Mappes et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 18, 2023," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 18, 2023; and Yaroslav Trofimov and Isabel Coles, "Ukraine's Offensive Slows Down, Zelensky Says, as Kyiv Rethinks Approach," *Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Mark A. Milley Hold Press Conference Following Virtual Ukraine Defense Contact Group Meeting," press release, July 18, 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Christopher Miller, "Ukraine Switches to Artillery Power for Eastern Push," *Financial Times*, July 27, 2023; Sam Cranny-Evans, "Russia's Artillery War in Ukraine: Challenges and Innovations," *RUSI*, August 9, 2023; and Stephen Biddle, "Back in the Trenches," *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Felicia Schwartz and Christopher Miller, "U.S. Faces Hurdles in Ramping Up Munitions Supplies for Ukraine War Effort," *Financial Times*, August 1, 2023; and U.S. Department of Defense, "Biden Administration Announces Additional Security Assistance for Ukraine," press release, July 7, 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Matthew Mpoke Bigg, "Ukraine Claims its Forces Staged a Brief Raid in Occupied Crimea," *New York Times*, August 24, 2023; Marcel Plichta, "The Reason Ukraine's Drone Attacks are More Effective Than Russia's," *Telegraph*, August 31, 2023; Jake Horton, Olga Robinson & Daniele Palumbo, "What Do We Know About Drone Attacks in Russia?" BBC, September 2, 2023;

¹⁴⁸ Tim Lister, Victoria Butenko, and Kostan Nechyporenko, "Ukraine Hits Russian Oil Tanker With Sea Drone Hours After Attacking Naval Base," CNN, August 5, 2023; Todd Prince, "Ukrainian Drone Attacks Against Russia Increase As Zelenskiy Hints At Change In Tactics," *RFE/RL*, August 5, 2023; Roman Olearchyk and Isobel Koshiw, "Ukraine Forces Probe Russian Defenses Across Dnipro River," *Financial Times*, August 11, 2023; and Anastasiia Malenko and Isabel Coles, "Ukraine Steps Up Campaign to Isolate Russian-Occupied Crimea," *Wall Street Journal*, August 12, 2023

¹⁴⁹ Interfax-Ukraine, "The Counteroffensive is Complex, but the Initiative Is on the Side of Ukraine," August 8, 2023.

the sequenced use of artillery ahead of infantry assaults.¹⁵⁰ The UAF also began combining Western-trained and -equipped units with more experienced—but generally less well equipped—units. By the end of July, the UAF reportedly committed a majority of its reserves in an ongoing attempt to breach Russian lines.¹⁵¹

The UAF has made small but tactically significant breaches in Russian lines.¹⁵² By August 2023, the UAF had seized the town of Robotyne—on the south (Orikhiv-Tokmak) front in the Zaporizhia region—and appeared to pierce the first of several Russian defensive lines.¹⁵³ Russia appeared to commit some of its last strategic reserves and redeployed forces from its counteroffensive in northeast Ukraine to blunt the UAF breakthrough.¹⁵⁴ The UAF attempted to exploit its success and push past Russian defensive lines, targeting the town of Verbove, southeast of Robotyne.¹⁵⁵

Even if the UAF is unable to continue its breakthrough, it can increasingly target Russian rear areas (including logistics and command and control targets) with artillery and precision missile strikes as the UAF recaptures territory.¹⁵⁶ While it is unclear whether Russia has sufficient forces to continue defending against UAF attacks, including enough capable units to push back UAF breakthroughs near Robotyne and Verbove, its forces continue to impose costs on the UAF and

Black Sea Grain Initiative

In July 2023, Russia withdrew from the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI), a United Nations-sponsored plan which allowed for the exports of grain, related foodstuffs, and fertilizers from three Ukrainian ports (Odesa, Chornomorsk, Yuzhny/Pivdennyi), and are important to easing food shortages in the developing world. After withdrawing from the BSGI, Russia launched missile strikes against these port and grain facilities.

Russia has continued to target Ukrainian port facilities for missile strikes, and threatened to treat commercial ships violating Russia's blockade as military targets. Russian President Putin denied rejoining the BSGI after talks with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan.

Sources: Emily Olson and Joe Hernandez, "Russia Suspends Ukraine Grain Deal. Here's What It Means for the Rest of the World," *NPR*, July 17, 2023; Pavel Polityuk, "Russia Strikes Ukraine's Danube Port, Driving Up Global Grain Prices," *Reuters*, August 2, 2023; United Nations, *Black Sea Grain Initiative Joint Coordination Center*.

¹⁵⁰ Daniel Michaels, "Ukraine's Lack of Weaponry and Training Risks Stalemate in Fight with Russia," *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2023; Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, "Ukrainian Troops Trained by the West Stumble in Battle," *New York Times*, August 2, 2023.

¹⁵¹ *Economist*, "The Ukrainian Army Commits New Forces in a Big Southward Push," July 27, 2023.

¹⁵² Several media outlets reported that U.S. and Ukrainian officials were at odds over the UAF's strategy, including Ukraine's focus on several fronts and an unwillingness to concentrate forces. Eric Schmitt et. al, "Ukraine's Forces and Firepower Are Misallocated, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, August 22, 2023; Michael R. Gordon et. al, "U.S., Ukraine Clash Over Counteroffensive Strategy," *Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 2023.

¹⁵³ Constant Meheut, "Ukraine Says It Retook a Village, a Win That Highlights the Rough Going," *New York Times*, August 28, 2023

¹⁵⁴ Igor Kossov, "New Brigade Bears Heavy Brunt of Russia's Onslaught in Kharkiv Oblast," *Kyiv Independent*, September 1, 2023; David Axe, "Russia Has Deployed Its Last Reserve Division To Southern Ukraine. Did A Ukrainian Screw-Up Make That Possible?" *Forbes*, September 1, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ Mike Eckel, "Breakthrough. Bridgehead. Salient. Glimmers Of Progress, And Hope, In Ukraine's Advances," *RFE/RL*, September 6, 2023; Howard Altman, "Breakthrough At Russia's Second Defensive Line," *The Drive*, September 7, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ This includes a recent strike on Russia's Black Sea Fleet shipyards in Sevastopol, Crimea. Yaroslav Trofimov, "Russian Navy Shipyard Targeted by Missile Strikes in Sevastopol; Two Vessels Hit," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2023.

hold its defensive lines.¹⁵⁷ The trajectory of the counteroffensive will likely be influenced by whichever side can sustain combat power and better manage rates of attrition.¹⁵⁸

Russia's Defense Industrial Base

Since the beginning of the war, Russia has lost or expended a significant amount of equipment, weapons, and ammunition. Not only does Russia need to replace equipment lost in battle, or during retreats such as the route from Kharkiv, it must equip the newly mobilized soldiers and units. According to testimony from Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, "if Russia does not initiate a mandatory mobilization and secure substantial third-party ammunition supplies beyond existing deliveries from Iran and others, it will be increasingly challenging for them to sustain even modest offensive operations."¹⁵⁹

As a result, Russia has mobilized its defense industry to a war footing and around the clock production to meet its war needs.¹⁶⁰ Putin has made visits to various defense factories, publicly chastised defense industry officials, and appointed former President and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to a new position of first Deputy Chairman of the Military-Industrial Commission that oversees the defense industry. Russia also enacted legislation to give the government "special economic measures" to command the defense industry, but recent data indicates Russia is running a large budget deficit to fund the war and defense industry.¹⁶¹

Russia's defense industry faces issues of production capacity. While its defense industry attempts to maximize output of newer systems, a portion of the defense industry's capacity is directed to updating, repairing, and modernizing equipment pulled from storage (such as installing reactive armor on older tanks), especially to replace losses and equip newly mobilized personnel.¹⁶² Additionally, Russia's heavy reliance on artillery in the war (often compensating for a lack of personnel prior to mobilization) has likely reduced Russian munitions stockpiles.¹⁶³ Reporting indicates Russia has been forced to purchase munitions from alternative sources, such as North

¹⁵⁷ Adam Taylor, "How Russia Learned From Mistakes to Slow Ukraine's Counteroffensive," *Washington Post*, September 8, 2023.

¹⁵⁸ Economist, "Are Ukraine's Tactics Working," September 12, 2023.

¹⁵⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, *To Receive Testimony on World Wide Threats*, 118th Cong., 1st sess., May 4, 2023.

¹⁶⁰ Yuliya Chernova and Stephen Fidler, "Putin Grips Economy Tighter to Supply Russian War Machine," *Wall Street Journal*, December 6, 2022; Anton Troianovski, "Putin Admits Shortcomings But Vows 'No Limits' to Russia's War Spending," *New York Times*, December 21, 2022.

¹⁶¹ Official Russian figures state that its military spending is expected to jump by \$71 billion dollars in 2023, even as Russia recorded a budget deficit of \$47.3 billion in 2022. Pavel Luzin, "The Skyrocketing Costs for Russia's War Effort," *Jamestown Foundation*, January 12, 2023; Samantha Lock, "Putin Scolds Defense Industry Minister in Televised Meeting for 'Fooling Around,'" *Guardian*, January 12, 2023; Reuters, "Russia Rainy Day Fund Shrinks by \$38 Billion as Government Plugs Deficit," January 18, 2023.

¹⁶² Georgy Aleksandrov, "The Barren Barrels," *Novaya Gazeta.eu*, November 2, 2022.

¹⁶³ Stephen Fidler and Ann M. Simmons, "Russia's Munitions Shortages Raise Questions Over How Long It Can Continue Ukraine War," *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2022; Hlib Parfonov, "Russia Struggles to Maintain Munition Stocks," *Jamestown Foundation*, December 5, 2022.

Korea and Iran.¹⁶⁴ Increasing ammunition production capacity is a key focus of Russia's defense industry, but constraints are likely to continue for the immediate future.¹⁶⁵

Due to sanctions and export controls, Russia faces a shortage of critical components for its advanced or modern systems (including helicopters, aircraft, PGMs, guided munitions, and communication equipment).¹⁶⁶ Despite limitations, Russia has been able to mitigate shortages by turning to a number of strategies, including sanctions evasion, stockpiling critical components prior to the war, import-substitution efforts (including thermal sights for tanks), and using civilian or lower-quality instead of military-grade components. These strategies allow Russia to continue production and upgrades to legacy systems taken out of storage, but sustaining rates of production are a likely continuing issue.¹⁶⁷

Additionally, the demands for mobilized personnel with technical skills are increasingly at odds with the defense industry's needs for those same personnel. While technical workers in the defense industry are exempted from mobilization, the competition for skilled recruits could complicate the defense industry's ability to meet production demands if Russia conducts further rounds of mobilization.¹⁶⁸

Outlook

As the war in Ukraine has extended for more than 18 months, analysts and officials believe attrition is the most likely trajectory for the immediate future, albeit with localized offensives and some changes in territorial control by both sides. The UAF and Russia continue to suffer substantial losses in personnel and equipment, and fighting is dominated by the heavy use of artillery. Russian authorities appear committed to continuing the war, despite failing to achieve its goals; as Secretary of State Blinken has said, "The objective was to erase Ukraine from the map, to eliminate its independence, its sovereignty, to subsume it into Russia. That failed a long time ago."¹⁶⁹ President Putin and Russian officials have increasingly called on the Russian population to prepare for a long conflict and are mobilizing the Russian economy and society to support the war.¹⁷⁰ Ukrainian officials, meanwhile, remain committed to recapturing all territory occupied by Russian forces.

In terms of personnel, the UAF continues to benefit from strong motivation and recruitment, although casualties and Ukraine's smaller population have made recruitment increasingly difficult

¹⁶⁴ Media reports indicate Russia is building factories to mass produce Iranian drones inside Russia. Russian President Putin and North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un also met in Russia on September 13, 2023 to discuss arms supplies. Dalton Bennet and Mary Ilyushina, "Inside the Russian Effort to Build 6,000 Attack Drones with Iran's Help," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2023; Guy Faulconbridge and Soo-Hyang Choi, "Kim Jong Un Meets Putin in Russia as Missiles Launch from North Korea," *Reuters*, September 13, 2023.

¹⁶⁵ James Beardsworth, "Is Russia Receiving Weapons From North Korea?" *Moscow Times*, December 18, 2022.

¹⁶⁶ Max Bergmann et al., *Out of Stock? Assessing the Impact of Sanctions on Russia's Defense Industry*, CSIS, April 2023.

¹⁶⁷ Andrew David et al., *Russia Shifting Import Sources Amid U.S. And Allied Export Restrictions*, Silverado Policy Accelerator, January 2023; Paul Schwartz, *A War of Attrition: Assessing the Impact of Equipment Shortages on Russian Military Operations in Ukraine*, CSIS, July 2023.

¹⁶⁸ Polina Ivanova, Max Seddon, and Daria Mosolova, "They Grabbed Whoever They Could": Putin's Draft Puts More Strain on Russian Businesses," *Financial Times*, November 29, 2022; Ian Talley and Anthony DeBarros, "China Aids Russia's War in Ukraine, Trade Data Shows," *Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 2023.

¹⁶⁹ Kaanita Iyer, "Blinken Says U.S. 'Working to Put Some Stability' Into Relationship with China," CNN, July 23, 2023.

¹⁷⁰ Michael Kimmage and Maria Lipman, "Wartime Putinism," *Foreign Affairs*, January 13, 2023; Alexander Gabuev, "Putin is Looking for a Bigger War, Not an Off-Ramp, In Ukraine," *Financial Times*, July 30, 2023.

and reliant on more coercive measures.¹⁷¹ The UAF continues to face challenges in training personnel, including training for new recruits on basic infantry skills and unit-level training to improve cohesion and coordination. Additionally, the UAF faces hurdles training junior officers to operate independently, as well as command staff to manage and coordinate complex operations.¹⁷²

While Russia's fall 2022 mobilization resolved its immediate personnel issues and was sufficient for defensive operations, its "shadow mobilization" strategies are not recruiting sufficient personnel to train and reconstitute forces for offensive operations.¹⁷³ Each side's ability to recruit and train new personnel, as well as to rotate and reconstitute units after losses, likely will influence the war's trajectory.

The UAF's equipment focus likely will shift toward sustainment, as U.S. and Western partners have largely exhausted supplies of new capabilities and systems. Increasingly, the UAF's focus will likely transition into repairing and maintaining its current stockpile of equipment and sustaining reliable supplies of artillery ammunition.¹⁷⁴ Some Western countries and defense firms appear to be negotiating joint production agreements with Ukraine's defense industry, a potentially key development to boost the UAF's autonomy and ability to sustain operations over the long term.¹⁷⁵

For Russia, several factors that have contributed to the Russian military's poor performance remain. Many of the Russian military's problems stem from leadership decisions and command and control challenges, highlighted by the Wagner Group mutiny in June 2023. The full effects of the mutiny remain unclear, as many Russian officers likely face ouster and removal for actual or perceived disloyalty toward the political leadership.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, it is unclear whether Russia will announce another round of mobilization due to the potential domestic political implications. Without a mobilization, it is unlikely the Russian military will have sufficient personnel to launch further large-scale offensive operations in the near term.¹⁷⁷

Despite its limitations and catastrophic losses in personnel and equipment, the Russian military remains an adaptive and resilient force.¹⁷⁸ Russian units continue to vigorously defend against UAF offensives and, in some areas, conduct smaller scale counteroffensives.¹⁷⁹ The Russian military continues to learn and adapt, but it is primarily a top-down process and it is unclear if

¹⁷¹ Hlib Parfonov, "Ukraine's Manpower Requirements Reaching a Critical Threshold," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 26, 2023; David L. Stern, "Zelensky Fires Military Recruitment Center Chiefs After Corruption Probe," *Washington Post*, August 11, 2023.

¹⁷² Watling and Reynolds, *Stormbreak: Fighting Through Russian Defenses in Ukraine's 2023 Offensive*, pp. 21-23.

¹⁷³ Anastasia Tenisheva, "Russia's Massive Army Recruitment Drive Appears to Deliver Few Soldiers," *Moscow Times*, June 8, 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Paul McLeary, "Allies' 'Main Effort' for Ukraine Shifting From Donating Weapons to Fixing Them," *Politico*, July 19, 2023; Isabel Coles, "Ukraine's Ammunition Chief Battles to Boost Production," *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2023; Missy Ryan, Alex Horton, and Karen DeYoung, "As Ukraine Flies Through Artillery Rounds, U.S. Races to Keep Up," *Washington Post*, August 21, 2023.

¹⁷⁵ Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Ukraine Defense Firms Seek Ties to Europe's Industry," *Defense News*, June 15, 2023; Isabel Coles, "Ukraine's Ammunition Chief Battles to Boost Production," *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2023.

¹⁷⁶ Mike Eckel, "All the Kremlin's Men: Russian Officials Drop Out of Sight, Suggesting Post-Mutiny Purges," *RFE/RL*, June 30, 2023.

¹⁷⁷ Economist, "Russia Is Resorting to Desperate Measures to Recruit Soldiers," August 1, 2023.

¹⁷⁸ Margarita Konaev and Owen J. Daniels, "The Russian Are Getting Better," *Foreign Affairs*, September 6, 2023.

¹⁷⁹ Alex Horton and Serhii Korolchuk, "In Northeast Ukraine, the Russians Are Coming—Or Maybe Setting a Diversion," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2023.

these lessons and adaptations are temporary or more permanent and widespread across its forces.¹⁸⁰

In the absence of a decisive military victory for either side in the immediate future, discussions are increasingly turning toward available options for the United States and allies to support Ukraine over the long term.¹⁸¹ These discussions include possible security guarantees for Ukraine, ranging from immediate NATO membership to other options outside of institutional NATO membership, such as the so-called Israel Model.¹⁸² However, these discussions are contingent upon negotiations and the territorial control of Ukraine, with the Biden Administration's position remaining that only Ukraine can begin negotiations: "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine."¹⁸³

Issues for Congress

Congress continues to closely track developments in the war in Ukraine, especially as it considers U.S. and international efforts to support Ukraine militarily and respond to events on the ground. Intensive interest and activity begun in the 117th Congress has carried over into the 118th Congress, especially with no end to the war in sight.

Since 2014, Congress has supported Ukraine's efforts to protect its territorial integrity, to include "lethal weapons of a defensive nature" since FY2016 and "lethal assistance" since FY2019. For FY2022 and FY2023, Congress provided \$48.7 billion in supplemental appropriations in security assistance, of which the Biden Administration has committed more than \$43 billion since the start of the 2022 war.¹⁸⁴ On August 10, 2023, the Biden Administration submitted to Congress a request for nearly \$24 billion in FY2024 supplemental funding for Ukraine and other international needs, including \$10.5 billion in security assistance.¹⁸⁵

In addition to providing further funds to support the UAF and Ukraine's defense of its territorial integrity, Congress remains interested in ensuring proper oversight and accountability of security assistance. Section 1247 of the FY2023 National Defense Authorization Act established the Ukraine Oversight Working Group, an interagency working group of inspectors general to formulate a "whole-of-government effort to advance accountability and end-use monitoring of weapons provided in response to the Ukraine crisis, and continued attention and regular briefings

¹⁸⁰ For more, see Watling and Reynolds, *Stormbreak: Fighting Through Russian Defenses in Ukraine's 2023 Offensive*, pp. 15-19.

¹⁸¹ Margaret MacMillan, "How Wars Don't End," *Foreign Affairs*, June 12, 2023; Liana Fix, "The Future is Now: Security Guarantees for Ukraine," *Survival*, vol. 65, no. 3 (2023), pp. 67-72; Samuel Charap, "An Unwinnable War," *Foreign Affairs*, June 5, 2023; Mick Ryan, "How Ukraine Can Win a Long War," *Foreign Affairs*, August 30, 2023.

¹⁸² For an argument in support of NATO membership for Ukraine, see Andriy Zagorodnyuk, "To Protect Europe, Let Ukraine Join NATO—Right Now," *Foreign Affairs*, June 1, 2023. While definitions vary on what constitutes the "Israel Model," it is generally recognized that it consists of supporting the development of a modern and capable military, as well as a robust and independent economy, so that the costs to any future aggressor would be unacceptably high and therefore dissuade any further aggression. For more, see Franz-Stefan Gady, "Turn Ukraine Into a Bristling Porcupine," *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2023; Eric Ciaramella, "Envisioning a Long-Term Security Arrangement for Ukraine," *Carnegie Endowment*, June 8, 2023.

¹⁸³ Reuters, "Biden Administration Did Not Sanction Unofficial Talks With Russians, State Department Says," July 6, 2023.

¹⁸⁴ CRS In Focus IF12040, *U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine*, by Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt and CRS Report R47275, *Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) Supplemental Funding for Ukraine: In Brief*, by Emily M. McCabe.

¹⁸⁵ CRS Insight IN12107, *Department of Defense Supplemental Funding for Ukraine: A Summary*, by Brendan W. McGarry.

to relevant congressional oversight committees on such efforts is imperative” (Section 1247, H.R. 7776, 117th Congress).

Some Members of Congress continue to be concerned regarding oversight of U.S. security assistance to Ukraine. In the 118th Congress, several bills have been introduced to create an independent Special Inspector General for Ukraine Assistance to supervise audits and investigations of U.S. assistance to Ukraine (H.R. 855; H.R. 2445; S. 651).

Congress remains concerned regarding malign Russian actors, specifically Russian PMCs such as the Wagner Group. Section 1243 of the FY2023 NDAA requires the Administration to report on the activities and dangers posed by Russian private military companies as well as the sanctions that exist to impede their activities (Section 1243, H.R. 7776, 117th Congress). In December 2022, the Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries Act (HARM Act) was introduced in the House and Senate to designate the Wagner Group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (H.R. 9381, S. 5164, 117th Congress). The Biden Administration designated the Wagner Group a Transnational Criminal Organization in January 2023.¹⁸⁶ Subsequently, the HARM Act was reintroduced in both the House and Senate in 2023.

Author Information

Andrew S. Bowen
Analyst in Russian and European Affairs

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¹⁸⁶ Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization,” press release, January 26, 2023.