

## A war not won, a war not lost. The military situation after 100 days of the Russian aggression against Ukraine

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One hundred days of Russian aggression against Ukraine has still not answered the basic question: who will win? The first phase of the clash – a manoeuvre warfare until the end of March, in which the aggressor had broadly defined operational goals – ended in failure for Russia, and resulted in it withdrawing from one of the two main theatres of operations and reducing its aspirations in other directions. The trench warfare phase, which has lasted since the turn of April, has not led to a breakthrough, but the extended actions have exhausted the Ukrainian army to an extent that the enemy has been able to make slow but consistent progress in achieving its assumed minimum goal: taking control of the entire Donbas and the land bridge to Crimea. Moscow has largely achieved this aim; since 24 February it has taken control of 80,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukraine's territory. It is not enough simply to maintain the *status quo* regarding external support for Ukraine, without which it will no longer be able to fight off the aggressor. The comprehensive rearming of the Ukrainian army with Western weapons and military equipment offers a chance to stop the Russian aggression. Moreover, in order to defeat Russia militarily, the West must display an attitude of consistent solidarity.

### The question of information when assessing the war

Attempting to assess the Russian-Ukrainian war in detail carries a high risk of error. The media is not receiving descriptions of the military struggle, but instead the deliberately distorted message from the warring parties, which in both cases serves the information war they are waging. The main goals of this message – as in all conflicts – are to discredit the enemy in all possible fields and to present the most favourable possible images of the military situation and the condition of their own troops.

The Ukrainian and Russian reports are almost completely contradictory. The least discrepancy is found in descriptions of the locations of combat, which with today's satellite observation systems cannot be hidden for long. However, each side's losses cannot currently be reliably assessed; the degree to which they are being overestimated remains unclear. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, between 24 February and 31 May, the Russian Armed Forces lost 30,700 soldiers, 1361 tanks, 3343 armoured combat vehicles, 659 barrel artillery systems, 207 multiple launch rocket systems, 94 air defence systems, 208 aircraft, 175 helicopters, 519 unmanned aerial vehicles, 120 missiles, 13 ships, 2290 vehicles of various categories and 49 units of specialised military equipment (radar installations, etc.).



The General Staff of the Russian Army estimates Ukrainian losses over the same period at 3363 tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, 1744 barrel artillery systems, 457 multiple launch rocket systems, 326 air defence systems, 185 aircraft, 129 helicopters, 1077 unmanned aerial vehicles, and 3329 vehicles of various categories (including platforms for specialised military equipment). The Russians have not provided their own estimates of how many Ukrainian soldiers have been killed.<sup>1</sup>

The combatants have provided information about their own losses only sporadically. Since mid-May, President Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly stated in interviews with Western media that between 50 and 100 Ukrainian soldiers are being killed and about 500 wounded every day.

An additional difficulty in assessing the military situation lies in the inaccuracies and contradictions in the Ukrainian message. Despite the measures taken by the

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government in Kyiv to monopolise reports on the situation in the combat zones, there is often a lack of message coordination on current events between the civilian and military authorities, as well as between the centre and the local structures. Moscow maintains one coherent message, but allows for the propagation of contradictory content when its main target is Ukrainian and Western public opinion.<sup>2</sup> Those who domestically promote content that is inconsistent with the Kremlin’s line are arrested. Ukrainian courts have handed down convictions for reporting about the military situation (mainly the enemy’s missile attacks and the activity of Ukrainian troops), justifying this by saying that public presentation of this information aids the enemy.<sup>3</sup>

### From ‘blitzkrieg’ to trench warfare: Russia’s defeat in the first period of the war

When it commenced its aggression on 24 February, Russia totally disregarded the Ukrainian army. It struck simultaneously in several directions, with forces which were barely a third of the size of the defenders’ (although much better equipped); it did not provide its units with proper air cover; and it attacked the military infrastructure in Ukraine’s interior to only a limited extent.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it tried to achieve its main goals as quickly as possible: taking the most important cities in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, together with Kyiv. After a relatively quick approach (during the first days of the war) to these places, the Russian units were halted by well-prepared and determined Ukrainian defence, and in the vast majority of cases their attempts to break it only resulted in losses for them. The exception was the break through the Ukrainian defence at the mouth of the Dnieper, after which the Russians took Kherson. The Russian forces managed to capture the main bridge over the Dnieper, which the defenders did not manage to blow up. The Ukrainian units were also unable to prepare a fortified line of defence there in time.

Moscow also underestimated the involvement of the United States, which has been providing the Ukrainian army with real-time intelligence information since the beginning of the war, involving

<sup>1</sup> On 26 May, the US Defense Department estimated Russian losses at nearly 1000 tanks, over 350 artillery systems, “almost three dozen” combat aircraft and over 50 helicopters; it did not estimate the Ukrainian losses. See ‘Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing’, U.S. Department of Defense, 26 May 2022, [defense.gov](https://www.defense.gov).

<sup>2</sup> The commentary by Igor Girkin (a.k.a. Strelkov), a veteran of the Donbas in 2014–15 and a colonel of the SpecNaz GRU reserve, is a flagship example of the two-track Russian information policy, as it frequently contrasts with the Kremlin’s line. He criticises the Russian military actions and the government’s policy; on the other hand, he promotes the thesis that NATO is preparing to send troops into western Ukraine, in line with the Russian message.

<sup>3</sup> Changes to Ukrainian law that made this possible were introduced at the end of March. They resulted from the ineffectiveness of earlier appeals by the authorities—mainly to Internet users—not to disseminate sensitive information.

<sup>4</sup> According to Ukrainian estimates, for over a week from the start of the aggression, the Russians sent about 30 planes a day over Ukraine. This means that during the first days of the war they outnumbered the defending forces in the airspace.

American military volunteers present in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> They helped the defenders to avoid some of the Russian strikes, and to inflict losses on the enemy that would have been impossible based on the Ukrainian army's technical reconnaissance resources alone. Some of the operations carried out in cooperation with the Americans, which resulted in the deaths of top-ranking leaders in command positions, seriously discredited the aggressor.<sup>6</sup> The losses of regimental and brigade commanders, who joined the fight as commanders of battalion tactical groups delegated by their subordinate units (instead of the command being assigned to the commanders of the battalions on which basis they were formed), indicate that during the initial period the Russians treated the operation against Ukraine no more seriously than they would have done during an exercise.

It was only in mid-March, when the line of military contact had been relatively stable for about a week, that the attackers significantly increased the use of air

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power (flying an average of about 200 aircraft a day, according to Pentagon data), and began to consistently destroy military infrastructure and parts of the critical defence infrastructure deep into Ukrainian territory (the targets included fuel tanks, the Kremenchuk refinery, civilian airfields and railway junctions through which military transports passed). In the combat zones, they also started murdering and raping the population, destroying civilian buildings and looting (previously such incidents had been sporadic and – regarding the shelling and bombing of civilian targets – accidental). Nevertheless, the Russians decided not to decisively block the movements of the Ukrainian troops (for example by destroying rail and road bridges over the Dnieper), or to cause any natural, technological or humanitarian disasters (for example, by destroying industrial plants [in order to cause pollution] or the dams on the Dnieper, electrical and heating plants, or pumping out the canals delivering water to the larger cities).

Russia's inability to defeat the Ukrainian army with the forces available to it led to the revision of its earlier plans, and (at the turn of April) the withdrawal of Russian units from northern Ukraine (the Kyiv, Chernihiv & Sumy oblasts), as well as a limitation of its operations in the south (troops were withdrawn from the regions west and north of Mykolaiv) and a slowdown in offensive activities in the Kharkiv region. The Russians moved from manoeuvring activities to trench warfare, mustering their forces in the south between the border of the Kherson & Mykolaiv oblasts and the eastern part of the Kharkiv oblast, focusing on the capture of the Donbas.

Russia's defeat in the first period of the war should be seen within the context of the strategic concept devised by Vladimir Putin (it is hard to attribute it to anyone else), in which the political requirements regarding the shape of the military operation were given unquestionable priority over the actual needs in terms of its conduct as based on the principles of the art of war. The authorities in the Kremlin decided, more or less consciously, to frame their intended political goals as part of a so-called 'special military operation'; this was intended to give the impression that this was not

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<sup>5</sup> J.E. Barnes, H. Cooper, E. Schmitt, 'US Intelligence Is Helping Ukraine Kill Russian Generals, Officials Say', *New York Times*, 4 May 2022, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com); S. Harris, D. Lamothe, 'Intelligence-sharing with Ukraine designed to prevent wider war', *Washington Post*, 11 May 2022, [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com); A. Horton, R. Nakhly, S. Mekhennet, 'Ukraine war volunteers are coming home, reckoning with difficult fight', *Washington Post*, 28 May 2022, [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).

<sup>6</sup> According to the Ukrainian side, eight generals of the Russian Armed Forces have died so far, including three commanders and three deputy commanders of general military armies – something which did not happen even in the initial period of the German attack on the Soviet Union. Russia has confirmed the deaths of two of them. In addition to the generals, an officer of the Chechen Ministry of the Interior referred to by his subordinates as a general (Major Magomed Tushayev) and a retired general of aviation who volunteered as a pilot have been added to the list of those killed. The higher numbers of Russian generals killed which have been cited have no underlying sources.

a Russian-Ukrainian war, but rather an intervention supporting the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in their confrontation with alleged Ukrainian aggression. As a result, Russia ended up mobilising 150,000 soldiers (including 100,000–120,000 sent onto Ukrainian territory) against determined defenders who, in addition to the 250,000 soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the 45,000-strong National Guard, hastily mobilised 100,000 members of the territorial defence; they were also able to engage the 45,000-strong State Border Service. Russia also failed to take any serious measures to strengthen their military potential, apart from rotating and replenishing losses.<sup>7</sup> Moscow tried to shore up the propaganda assumption it had adopted by maximising the mobilisation effort from the manpower available to it in the occupied part of the Donbas (as well as the territories it has occupied since 24 February).<sup>8</sup>

It remains unclear why Russia did not launch a full-scale attack on Ukraine (in the sense of the maximum commitment of the forces and resources necessary to destroy

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the Ukrainian army at the commencement of operations), and instead launched a ‘special military operation’ which was much more limited in terms of the forces and resources used. It should be considered unlikely that the Russian military – especially after the lesson they had received in the first weeks of the war – would not voluntarily resort to the options available to them, especially when considering the goals they appeared to be pursuing.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the Kremlin did not decide to change the assumption it had adopted, and instead hoped to achieve its goals at the expense of its multiplying human and material losses, as well as the total disaster of the reputation of its army (at least in Western reporting), which had hitherto been a source of pride, and even a kind of role model, for the Russian people. Facing the choice of announcing general mobilisation and unambiguously declaring war, Moscow has decided to limit the objectives of the operation.

### **Trench warfare: the phase of equilibrium, and the slow progress of the Russians**

The limitation of the operation’s objectives and the change in the nature of its activities did not lead to any significant changes for over a month. The Ukrainian army consistently implemented the assumptions of its defence plan, not engaging in a war of manoeuvre; as the side which does not have the needed air support, it is much weaker (despite its numerical superiority). This plan was favoured by the creation of fortified defence centres around the cities which were the largest or the most important in terms of communication. However, the negative cost of such activities was a level of destruction that could not be avoided. Nevertheless, as part of the preparations for the defence of the cities, as many of their inhabitants as possible were evacuated. The Ukrainian army was also forced to fight in built-up areas by the growing disproportions in equipment: initially it had no opportunity to replenish the losses in heavy weapons, although thanks to supplies from the West it had a large number of light weapons available (including anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles). The walls of buildings had to substitute for the armour of combat vehicles for the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

<sup>7</sup> According to Ukrainian estimates, during the three months of the war, up to 170,000 soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and Rosgvardiya have participated in military activities in Ukraine, taking into account rotations and reinforcements.

<sup>8</sup> The so-called people’s militias of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics are included in the total Russian potential engaged in Ukraine, and are treated as an integral part of it.

<sup>9</sup> The peculiar restraint displayed by the Russian army in the first weeks of the war underpinned the thesis in Ukrainian propaganda that Russia’s military potential in the field of precision weapons (especially the shortage of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles), aviation and battalion tactical groups was limited. It was reasoned that since Russia had not used them, or did not use them anymore, it means that they did not exist. This thesis was rendered obsolete by the prolongation of the war, especially the massive missile attacks carried out throughout the entire territory of Ukraine in April.

Encouraged by the aggressors' local inactivity, the Ukrainian forces took offensive actions towards Kherson in April and Kharkiv in May, thanks to which they most often expanded the territory they held to include places in no-man's-land or which had previously been abandoned. These actions peaked in the first half of May in Kharkiv oblast: until they encountered stronger resistance from the Russian side, the defenders were able to shift their positions by an average of several kilometres away from the borders of Kharkiv, and even reached the border with Russia to the north of the city. However, consistent Russian shelling and bombing, as well as almost daily repeated attacks on Ukrainian positions, have managed to weaken the defenders' forces in the Donbas, which has resulted in the aggressor making progress there since mid-May – symbolically, since the capitulation of the defenders of Mariupol.<sup>10</sup>

The Russian forces are still operating with forces that are numerically weaker than the defenders', and only in the areas of the most severe fighting can the adversaries'

**” The Ukrainian army is unable to launch a counter-offensive. The opponent is taking advantage of their increasing exhaustion and is moving slowly but steadily forward.**

forces be considered comparable. The Russians are mainly making progress thanks to their advantages over the defenders in terms of technology and firepower: in the combat areas they dominate the air,<sup>11</sup> have massive artillery support, and are receiving constant replenishment (especially in the field of heavy weapons). The aggressors have learned lessons from the first phase of the war and are acting much more cautiously; they are focused on one operational direction (the Donbas), and maintaining their positions on the others, periodically probing the Ukrainian defences.

The Ukrainian forces have probably lost the vast majority of the heavy weapons and military equipment with which they started the war, and the involvement of their air force is now merely symbolic. Although there is no reliable data on the defenders' equipment losses, it is demonstrated by the lack of any offensive actions in which the Ukrainian forces would be forced to break through the Russian defence, especially considering the extremely strong domestic pressure to carry them out. The Ukrainians were not only unable to organise and carry out the relief of Mariupol, but have also been able to even attack Kherson – an operation in a much easier direction, which Kyiv has signalled several times, and which in media coverage could have offset the capitulation of the Azovstal plant.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusions and perspectives

Despite the failure, and at times even humiliation, which they suffered in the first phase of the war, the Russian forces have continuously had the initiative since its beginning. They have a significant firepower and technical advantage; they are not inferior to the defenders in terms of their level of training and understanding of the art of war, and their motivation (although clearly lower than the Ukrainians') remains sufficient to consistently undertake and conduct offensive actions. The Russians have greater freedom and ability to rotate their fighting units, replace lost equipment and deliver supplies to combat zones. Their basic limitation is their numbers, which are insufficient

<sup>10</sup> The city of Mariupol, which was defended from 24 February to 16 May (when the defenders in the Azovstal complex capitulated), was of both strategic (without capturing it, the Russians could not have built a stable land link to Crimea) and symbolic importance for Ukraine (the city repulsed a Russian attack in 2014, and in recent months it had become a symbol of the steadfastness of Ukrainian resistance). After Russian troops took over the southern and central parts of Zaporizhzhia oblast and the south-west part of Donetsk oblast, the defenders of Mariupol tied up the aggressor's forces (which numbered 12 BTGs in the peak period) for many weeks, which meant they could not be used in other directions.

<sup>11</sup> According to Kyiv's data on the activity and losses of Russian aviation, the effectiveness of Ukrainian air defence—depending on the calculation of Russian planes presented by the Ukrainian side—runs at the level of 4 or 7%. According to information from the Pentagon, though, it does not exceed 1%.

<sup>12</sup> The closest Ukrainian positions to Mariupol are 120 km away (southeast of Zaporizhzhia). The Ukrainian position at the junction of the Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts is 20–30 km from Kherson. The city is also separated from the main Russian grouping by the river Dnieper, while there are no natural barriers between it and the Ukrainian-controlled Mykolaiv.



either to achieve the goals originally set by Moscow, or quickly to resolve them militarily after their reduction. Even considering that a significant part of the 110 Russian BTGs currently present in Ukraine are not involved in combat,<sup>13</sup> it should be assessed that the forces they have accumulated do not guarantee the success of an offensive in more than one direction at the same time. The Ukrainian forces defend deeply throughout the entire line of contact.

The Ukrainian army is now entirely dependent on external supplies of weapons and military equipment, as well as any other *matériel* needed to conduct hostilities. Its operational depth reaches to Poland and (partly) Romania. After the destruction of important elements of their military and critical infrastructure (mainly fuel depots), the defenders now only have well-trained soldiers with high morale – although how well it can be maintained in the long term remains an open question (it will primarily depend on how the military situation develops). If the current level of support (in terms of the amount and nature of the armaments & military equipment provided by the West) remains at the present level, then the Ukrainians have no chance of levelling the imbalance in equipment and taking the military initiative, not to speak of halting and displacing the enemy from Ukrainian territory.

As long as the *status quo* is maintained, the aggressor's conquest of the part of the Luhansk oblast remaining under Ukrainian control, and then of the Donetsk oblast, should be considered as just a matter of time (although depending on the parties' determination, this process may take several weeks to several months).<sup>14</sup> If this happens, the Russians will have full freedom to launch an offensive in another direction. However, the assumption of the so-called 'special military operation' which Moscow has adopted makes the total destruction of the Ukrainian army and the conquest of the entire country impossible. To do so would require Russia to mobilise its entire military potential; so far nothing suggests that it is inclined to do so because of the potential domestic political cost this would incur. A full-scale evaluation of the state and possibilities of the Russian army is thus premature (leaving aside the lack of reliable information), just as it was incorrect to assess the potential of the US army through the lens of the war in Vietnam.<sup>15</sup>

To change the military situation in Ukraine's favour requires a significant increase in the supply of heavy weapons (including offensive weaponry) to the Ukrainian army, which would then be able to counterbalance the Russian advantage in equipment. At the current level of intensity, this means the delivery to Ukraine each month of several hundred tanks, armoured combat vehicles and artillery systems (barrel and rocket), as well as several dozen combat aircraft and helicopters. In view of the depletion of post-Soviet arms resources – both in the Ukrainian army and at the disposal of NATO countries<sup>16</sup> – the ultimate solution can only be a complete transition to Western armament. However, this depends not only on the decisions taken by the Alliance's individual states (they would have to exceed the current 'red lines' imposed on them, motivated by the desire not to escalate

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<sup>13</sup> According to data from the Pentagon, 110 Russian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) were operating in Ukraine at the end of May, with the majority of them – around 50 BTGs – constituting the southern grouping (in the left-bank part of Kherson oblast, and the Zaporizhzhia oblast). The aggressor's remaining groups – the western one in the right-bank part of Kherson oblast, the central one in the Donbas and the eastern one in Kharkiv oblast – are of a comparable size, i.e. about 20 BTGs each.

<sup>14</sup> The figure of 80,000 km<sup>2</sup> refers to the newly occupied areas of the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and part of the Mykolaiv and Kharkiv oblasts; together with the territories occupied since 2014, Russia now holds 125,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukrainian territory.

<sup>15</sup> Due to the military potential of each side, the Russian aggression against Ukraine is more comparable to the American operation in Vietnam than with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Until the aggression began, the preparations Russia carried out also recalled the Desert Shield and Desert Storm operations in Iraq. However, Moscow decided not to carry out an operation whose initial phase would have involved a massive air-missile strike against the enemy's armed forces and critical infrastructure facilities, but instead it gradually escalated the use of aviation, similar to American operations in Vietnam.

<sup>16</sup> According to official Ukrainian assessments, at the end of May the Ukrainian Armed Forces had a greater supply of 155-mm (NATO) artillery ammunition than of 152-mm (post-Soviet) ammunition.

the conflict), but also on the ability of as many Ukrainian soldiers as possible to master the new equipment, which often has different structures and methods of use from the post-Soviet armaments, relatively quickly.

The arming, and in fact the total rearming the Ukrainian Armed Forces, would not guarantee the success of the Ukrainian counter-offensive, but would create real chances to launch one. It should be assumed that such a move would force Russia to mobilise and shift to a full-on war economy, in which case the Ukrainian-Russian military clash could turn into a clash of the economic potentials of Russia and the West. If the consistent, long-term military support of the Euro-Atlantic community for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia is maintained, Moscow will not have a chance to win this clash.

### Map. Military situation after 100 days of war



Source: author's own research.