

Total defence. Six months of Russia's aggression against Ukraine

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After six months of war, Ukraine can celebrate success – due to the mobilisation of its entire population to fight, and to unceasing reconnaissance and logistics support from the West, it continues to successfully defend itself. Russia, in turn, has failed to attain its initial objectives, including the “denazification” and “demilitarisation” of Ukraine and the intention to seize control of the country. The armed confrontation has already lasted far longer than the Kremlin had anticipated, which suggests that the first six months of war can be viewed from Russia's perspective as a failure. Since the end of March 2022, when Russia decided to withdraw its troops from northern Ukraine and from portions of Mykolaiv Oblast, and when a frontline was formed in the south and in the east, Russian aggression has shifted from a phase of manoeuvre warfare to that of trench warfare. Since then, the strategic situation has not changed significantly and remains largely static. However, Russia continues to possess the initiative and any changes happening at the front are the consequences of its actions. The aggressor's troops have maintained a relatively stable land bridge with Crimea and are slowly pushing the Ukrainian army back from its positions in the Donbas, which continues to be the main area of fighting. For the time being, the counter-offensive announced by Kyiv continues to form part of an information strategy aimed at boosting the defenders' morale. Ukraine continues to lack sufficient manpower and adequate means, i.e. mainly heavy weaponry of an offensive nature, to attempt to recapture the occupied territories.

Ukraine: all for the front

Due to insufficient resources and in a situation of full dependence on the West when it comes to the supply of materials used during the war (weapons and military equipment, ammunition, fuel etc.), Kyiv decided to rely on total defence. Practically, the entire potential of the state was dedicated to defence purposes, and almost 1 million soldiers, policemen and other personnel became involved in defence activities as a result of general mobilisation. At least 450,000 soldiers serve in formations of a strictly military nature: the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the National Guard, the State Border Service and Territorial Defence, and this number could be further increased by way of forming volunteer territorial defence units when needed. Despite the fact that in the theatre of operations the defenders of Ukraine outnumber the Russian forces by three to one (the number of troops directly engaged by the aggressor does not exceed 150,000), their potential is weakened by equipment shortages



and – according to Ukrainian estimates – a 10–15-fold Russian advantage in heavy weaponry. Ukraine is striving to offset this by using civilian infrastructure for defence purposes in locations in which attempts were made to evacuate the local residents beforehand.¹ This is the only way for the soldiers on the Ukrainian side, mainly equipped with light weapons supplied by the West in large amounts, to hold off the attacks. However, as a result of these actions, Russian artillery and aviation are increasingly destroying such locations. In addition, the Russians are systematically and deliberately targeting civilian facilities that have not been seized by the Ukrainian army and are still being used for their original purpose. The supplies of artillery (including rocket launchers) from the West are too small to be effective in stopping the enemy’s repeated assaults on Ukrainian positions, and although the damage inflicted by the defenders is impressive (in recent weeks mainly using guided missiles launched from HIMARS systems and, to a much smaller degree, as a result of acts of sabotage), it continues to be insignificant compared with the adversary’s potential.²

At present, Ukraine is unable to make use of its manpower superiority in combat, mainly due to the fact that it is unable to properly equip the newly formed subunits.

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However, due to the persistent threat of a renewed Russian strike from the north, Kyiv has decided not to ease the restrictions resulting from the law on general mobilisation, which, since 24 February 2022, has been extended every three months, and has rejected public demands relating to this issue.³ The defence ministry leadership has announced that, in addition to its efforts to replenish the current units on an ongoing basis, it is only able to engage a small number of the requisite military specialists: artillerymen, signallers, UAV operators, and cyber warfare specialists. In order to maintain defensive cohesion, the Ukrainian authorities have decided to apply several other measures, the most important of which involves amending the relevant laws to commit territorial defence units to fighting in operations exceeding their scope of competence. Increasingly, they are being used to support the regular units operating at the frontline. In addition, Kyiv is making attempts to prevent any cracks in the authorities’ monopoly on information security of military operations, which have formed over recent months, by condemning any opinions and reports on the situation at the front that do not comply with the official message endorsed by the government.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Ukrainian authorities have had the upper hand in their confrontation with Russia in the information sphere, which allows them to maintain the public’s conviction that the defence is effective and that ultimately the enemy troops can be defeated and driven out of the occupied territories, including Crimea and the Donbas. Only on rare occasions does Kyiv admit that this defence is maintained at the expense of significant losses. On 22 August 2022, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, estimated the number of Ukrainian soldiers killed at nearly 9,000, which should be considered an underestimate.⁴

¹ On 30 July 2022, president Volodymyr Zelensky announced mandatory evacuation of Donetsk Oblast residents and on 3 August 2022 the Ukrainian government issued a regulation to this effect.

² Since June 2022, Ukraine has received 16 HIMARS rocket launchers (there are no reports suggesting that it may have lost any of these) alongside guided rockets (so-called GMLRS) with a range of up to 80 km, as well as less than 10 other multiple rocket launchers donated by the United Kingdom and Germany, which have also provided rockets with a range of up to 70 km.

³ President Zelensky has rejected a petition signed by more than 25,000 citizens requesting him to ease the restrictions and allow certain groups of men to leave Ukraine.

⁴ According to data compiled by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, in that period 45,400 Russian soldiers have been killed.

In its information narrative, Kyiv is skilfully emphasising its own successes, even if minor, and the failures of the Russian side. Based on these statements, it is reinforcing the message that a Ukrainian counter-offensive is under way. On the one hand, the authorities have been using this term since spring 2022 to suggest that the counter-offensive is ongoing and successful. On the other hand, in a situation of mounting public pressure and expectation of tangible results, they seek to assuage public opinion and emphasise that the conditions for the final defeat of the enemy have not yet emerged. Any form of damage inflicted on the aggressor is regarded as an element of this counter-offensive. Initially, this involved claiming to have liberated the areas previously abandoned by the Russians, or located in a belt of no-man's-land at the time of the formation of the frontline. However, at present, effective attacks on the enemy's hinterland carried out using the HIMARS systems, as well as acts of sabotage, are most often regarded as manifestations of the counter-offensive.

The actions carried out in Crimea in August 2022 are of particular importance. However, aside from the first spectacular attack on Saki airfield (9 August), the results of subsequent strikes were limited, and the most recent actions (20–21 August) were unlikely to produce any tangible effects.⁵ In spite of this, these actions should be viewed as a major success from the perspective of psychological warfare – the very display of Ukrainian activity in Crimea taunted the occupier and exposed the fact that Russia had failed to control the situation on the peninsula.⁶

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Russia: “we are not waging any war”

Throughout the six months of war, Russia has decided not to announce mobilisation, and hostilities in Ukraine continue to be carried out by just a small portion of the Russian Armed Forces’ manpower potential. Since 24 February 2022, around 250,000 troops have participated in these activities, including auxiliary units. Moscow is making attempts to convince Russian society and international public opinion that the so-called special military operation, alongside its consequences in the form of Western sanctions, have not significantly affected the Russian state’s functioning, including in the military sphere. To corroborate this claim, it emphasises the fact that the operational level of activity of the Russian army and of the armaments industry has been maintained (i.e. it is similar to that recorded in previous years). This mainly involves the preparations for the most important training event scheduled for this year, i.e. the “Vostok-2022” exercise planned for September, which is to be held with the participation of external partners (aside from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation states, China, India and Mongolia have confirmed their presence), and the “Army-2022” International Military-Technical Forum held in August.

Formally, participation in the so-called special military operation continues to be voluntary. Paradoxically, this is evidenced by the difficulties in recruiting the prospective perpetrators of the hostilities in Ukraine, which is apparent in at least some Russian regions. Unlike in late March and early April, when the failure of the Russian ‘blitzkrieg’ resulted in instances of soldiers’ overt and collective reluctance to continue to take part in the fighting, after six months of war, despite the rumoured problems with recruiting volunteers to serve in its ranks, Russia is still able to replenish its losses.

⁵ The blowing up of the ammunition depot at Saki airfield on 9 August and the resulting losses (destruction or damage of eight aircraft) have caused a mobilisation among the occupier services responsible for the security of the aggressor troops’ hinterland. According to reports, as a result of another two attacks an ammunition depot located outside of military facilities was destroyed, and a fire broke out in the barracks. There is no information on possible losses caused during subsequent attacks.

⁶ In the context of the situation’s impact on Crimea residents and tourists, the fact that they heard the explosions and shots incoming from the direction of the airfield and the military base was significant.

In numerous Russian regions volunteer battalions are being formed and their tasks will most likely depend on the current situation at the front. Moreover, according to the Ukrainian side, recruitment of their members is progressing at a slower pace than initially planned. In the Donbas, which is the main area of fighting, local residents mobilised to serve in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk people's militias constitute Russia's main 'cannon fodder'. This includes individuals hailing from the newly occupied territories. Considering the course of the conflict so far, there are no indications that they could be more prone to desertion or surrender to captivity, and the scale of these two phenomena should be viewed as insignificant. This is also borne out by the fact that this topic, previously used as a tool in Ukrainian information warfare, has disappeared from the narrative.

The Russian armaments industry is doing its job

The special military operation is more noticeable in Russia at the economic level, as is apparent from the expansion of the production base of some companies operating in the armaments industry, mainly manufacturers of unmanned aerial vehicles and certain types of artillery and rocket munitions. Most of the new contracts announced, in August (as is typical) during the "Army-2022" forum, should be viewed as linked to the war in Ukraine, and the proportions of specific spending categories to date (including formations that are not involved in the special military operation, in particular the Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces, as well as the Aerospace Defence Forces) have not visibly changed. Although the details revealed concerning purchases may be an aspect of information warfare, Russia has been carefully implementing its previously announced arms programmes (over the last two decades, changes and delays have only been recorded for the launch of production of next generation weapons and for several shipbuilding programmes). It should be assumed that the Western sanctions introduced to date, targeting Russia's financial and technological sectors, can largely be mitigated in the armaments sector. However, the need to find substitutes for the sanctioned components, in particular in the sphere of electronics, will likely have a devastating effect on the performance of Russian-made weapons and military equipment, and the technological gap between Russian products and those manufactured by leading Western producers will increase.

The number of orders for weaponry overhaul and modernisation (a total of 100 tanks and infantry fighting vehicles out of a total of

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3,800 pieces of weaponry and military equipment ordered⁷) is small, which seems to corroborate the fact that the equipment losses Russia has suffered so far have not been sufficiently severe to force it to accelerate the modernisation of the body of weapons it already has in its stockpile rather than manufacture new units (this process lasts longer and requires more funds). This is further evidenced by the fact that Russia continues to meet its export obligations, including the sale of those types of weapons that are commonly used during the present conflict. In line with the previously announced plans, Russian industry has handed over a batch of upgraded 2S3M Acatsiya self-propelled howitzers to the Belarusian army, and launched the process of overhauling the Su-25 assault aircraft belonging to the Belarusian Air Force. In June 2022, brand new Mi-28 attack helicopters were delivered to Uganda. Fragmentary reports disclosed by the United States and Canada, which – unlike in the first months of the conflict – in recent months are published less frequently and regularly, seem to corroborate these facts.⁸

⁷ 'Контракты на форуме «Армия-2022»', *bmpd's Journal*, 17 August 2022, bmpd.livejournal.com.

⁸ Information disclosed on 12 August 2022 by the Canadian army intelligence services suggest that since 24 February Russia has lost a total of 90 aircraft and helicopters. According to estimates provided by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the number of enemy aircraft and helicopters destroyed over that period is 426. See the tweet by the Canadian Armed Force, 12 August 2022, twitter.com; 'Росія втратила в Україні щонайменше 90 літаків та гелікоптерів – канадська розвідка', *Укрінформ*, 12 August 2022, ukrinform.ua.

Six months of war has not resulted in a depletion of Russia's stockpiles of weapons and precision-guided munitions. While Russian strategic aviation is using up its stockpile of Soviet-era missiles, it continues to carry out strikes using the latest Iskander and Kalibr systems, as well as Oniks rockets, which have proven to be a dual-use weapon (for destroying sea and land targets). The Russian army's recent orders include the delivery of new Iskander missiles. However, it is unclear whether these orders are in excess of the previously approved procurement plans and are due to depletion of stocks. Similarly, it is not known for sure why, in the first weeks of war, the Russians limited their use of the Tochka-U missiles they were employing alongside Iskander missiles. Tochka-U missiles had been withdrawn from service at the end of the previous decade (their precision and range is much less impressive than the precision and range of Iskanders). Possible reasons include stock depletion (although this should be considered unlikely), poor effectiveness and the intention to use them in a different manner than those presently carried out by the Russian missile brigades.

The scale of (and further prospects for) utilising the decommissioned Soviet-era weapons in Ukraine remains an open question. At present,

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losses suffered by some Russian regular units and by all units of people's militias are being replenished using these weapons. Unlike during the initial stage of the war, which involved manoeuvre warfare, it has become the norm for the aggressor (at least its land troops) to spare their most advanced weaponry and 're-use' the Soviet-era weapons in combat.⁹ Unless Ukraine receives significant supplies of modern Western weapons, one should not expect Russia to alter its current policy when it comes to equipping its subunits involved in the fighting. This does not refer to aircraft and helicopters – due to the fact that they perform relatively precise tasks and incur relatively minor losses¹⁰ – or to unmanned aerial vehicles which are absent from Russia's Soviet-era stockpiles. New batches of UAVs were immediately ordered from three domestic manufacturers, who had taken steps to increase their production. Both Russian and Ukrainian combat experience indicates that although all some types of UAVs are useful on the modern-day battlefield, they are easily destroyed.

Conclusions

If the present status quo in the war is maintained, in which Ukraine can only slow down the aggressor's advance, this would work to Moscow's advantage. Depending on Russia's needs and also, to a certain extent, its socio-economic resilience, following a possible seizure of the remaining part of the Donbas¹¹ the Russians may announce a pause in hostilities, or they may continue their military activity in other locations. In the current situation, the aggressor capturing the remaining part of Donetsk Oblast should be viewed as only a matter of time, although considering the pace of the Russian advance in recent months, this could take many months. Without a significant increase in weapon supplies from the West, a Ukrainian counter-offensive is highly unlikely, due to the fact that its launch (on a limited scale, most likely in the direction of Kherson, which would be the easiest to recapture) would be carried out in response to public pressure and the authorities' desire to gain additional credibility. At the same time, it would be an act of desperation on the part of the government.

⁹ Paradoxically, destruction of weapons and equipment during hostilities reduces the costs of their decommissioning that would need to be incurred in peacetime. This is particularly true for ammunition, as – according to Ukrainian sources – a portion of the ammunition the Russian army is using is beyond its expiry date.

¹⁰ A compilation of Ukrainian military data suggests that in recent months around 1% of all flights performed by the Russian Air Force were lost. See '3 лютого Росія стягнула понад 300 вертольотів та 400 літаків до кордонів України, – Ігнат', Цензор.Нет, 16 August 2022, censor.net.

¹¹ The Ukrainian side claims that it controls 45% of Donetsk Oblast and – according to the head of the military-civil administration of Luhansk Oblast Serhiy Haidai – two unnamed villages in Luhansk Oblast.

It would result in major losses among the defenders (the Ukrainian army command speaks openly about it) and would not guarantee success.

Almost since the beginning of the invasion, Ukraine has pursued a strategy of total defence, as part of which, having run out of its own defence resources and having decided to rely on the West to replenish them, Kyiv is no longer able to increase its military capabilities. Any change in the present military situation would depend on whether Russia can be forced to abandon its assumptions, on the basis of which it has so far been conducting its “special military operation” (which is limited from its perspective). Such change could only happen if the Ukrainian army receives large and comprehensive supplies of heavy weaponry and military equipment, as a result of which the number of weapons and equipment it would have at its disposal would be equal to that of its adversary. Such supplies would need to include hundreds of aircraft and helicopters and thousands of fighting vehicles. Only then would Ukraine be in a position to carry out an effective counter-offensive and to drive the aggressor out of the occupied part of its territory. Russia, in turn, would have to decide whether to declare general mobilisation and commit its entire potential to the fight, or to acknowledge defeat and withdraw in a manner similar to the US withdrawal from Vietnam. If Moscow decides to pick up the gauntlet, this would take the war to an entirely new level.