

RUSSIA'S LESSONS FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE: FORCE GENERATION AND REINFORCEMENT ON THE UKRAINIAN FRONT

Force generation has yielded some of the most significant lessons for Russia in war against Ukraine, which is likely to influence its conduct in this and any future conflict.

Russia has demonstrated its ability to mobilise and recruit a large number of personnel, but it has struggled to provide them with proper training, impeding its prospects of making substantial military advances.

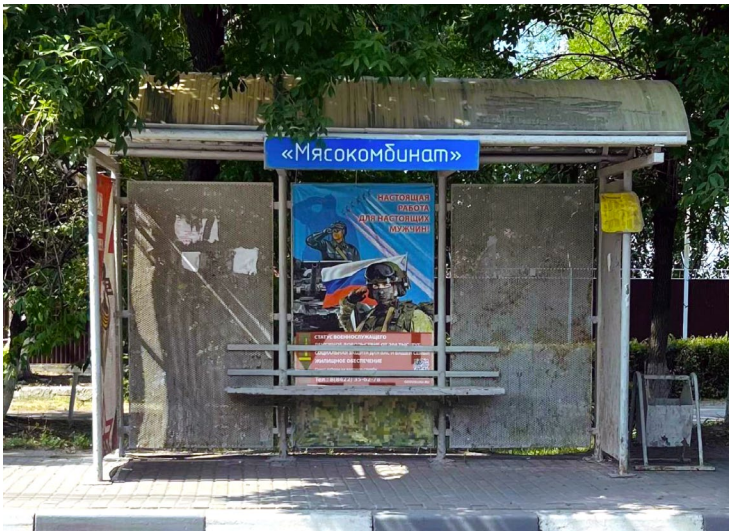
The Russian Armed Forces will likely be able to continue making tactical advancements in 2024, but they are unlikely to be able to carry out well-led and coordinated major joint and combined arms offensive operations.

Russia is likely to persist with its extensive attrition-based warfare against Ukraine in 2024.

Following the withdrawal from the outskirts of Kyiv in the spring of 2022 and the consolidation of its forces in eastern and southern Ukraine, Russia's military realised it needed to rapidly replenish its depleted manpower. By late spring 2022, officers on the ground were pressuring the Ministry of Defence and the Presidential Administration to urgently announce a mobilisation. On 21 September 2022, Putin declared a partial mobilisation aimed at enlisting around 300,000 soldiers. While the mobilisation was relatively limited given Russia's population size, Putin's decision was highly unpopular among the people. According to various sources, up to a million individuals fled the country as a result.

Additionally, the military commissariats were unprepared for the simultaneous mobilisation of 300,000 troops, primarily due to incomplete lists and databases of reservists. For example, there was no accurate record of reservists' recent addresses, making it challenging to deliver mobilisation notices and causing additional work for officials. Despite being time and resource-consuming, the mobilisation process eventually achieved its objective. Based on the lessons learned from the 2022 mobilisation, Russia probably managed to improve its mobilisation system in 2023 through legal amendments, digitisation of databases (including the delivery of mobilisation notices) and enhancing strategic communication, among other measures. If the Russian president decides to announce a large-scale mobilisation in 2024, the responsible authorities will likely perform better than in 2022.

In January 2023, the Russians launched a major offensive in eastern Ukraine. They had high expectations that newly mobilised units would significantly change the protracted conflict and capture large territories in Ukraine or at least secure the east bank of the Dnipro River. However, despite numerical superiority in troops and equipment, Russia only managed to capture the city of Bakhmut and some of its suburbs, such as Soledar, in five months. The Wagner private military company played a crucial role in the capture of Bakhmut. Wagner introduced a new and unprecedented method: recruiting prisoners. Using them as cannon fodder brought tactical success on the battlefield, leading to the capture of Bakhmut and the surrounding area. Furthermore, using prisoners as cannon fodder was relatively safe for Russian society, as it did not lead to dissatisfaction despite significant losses. According to various sources, more than 20,000 people were killed in the Battle of Bakhmut.



Recruitment campaign blunders: the fast track to a "meat grinder".

Source: Telegram

On 1 March 2023, the Russians launched a large-scale recruitment campaign with the goal of recruiting over 400,000 troops by the end of the year. Regional, city and district governments, and various government agencies were involved in the recruitment process alongside military commissariats. Each Russian region, city and district had precise recruitment goals, tasks and strict reporting obligations. Central coordination and control of recruitment occurred in Moscow, where bonuses were paid for good results (exceeding 75% of the monthly recruitment target), and penalties were imposed for poor performance. Recruitment tasks were also assigned to major enterprises and military units, where conscripts were enlisted. Additionally, legislative amendments were introduced to allow for recruitment from prisons. The recruitment effort evolved into a national project with substantial financial resources allocated to it.

The largest contingent of recruits were reservists, accounting for more than 50% (varies by region), followed by debtors and detainees, making up approximately 30% of recruits (varies by region). To a lesser extent, contracts were signed with conscripts completing their military service, foreign citizens (with Russian residency permits, dual citizenship, or those applying for Russian citizenship) and unemployed individuals. The recruitment rates vary by region. The main obstacle to recruitment is fear of war, which often outweighs the substantial financial incentives offered to recruits.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES FOR RECRUITS:

1. From March to June 2023, recruits received a signing bonus of 195,000 roubles (approximately 2,000 euros).
2. Starting from June 2023, the signing bonus and various other bonuses have gradually increased to around 300,000 to 1,000,000 roubles (approximately 3,000 to 10,000 euros), depending on the region and its financial resources.
3. Depending on the position, recruits' salaries start from 200,000 roubles (approximately 2,000 euros) per month, occasionally exceeding five times the average salary in certain Russian regions.
4. Additional bonuses are paid to soldiers for their engagement in combat, destruction of Ukrainian military equipment, and for those who have been wounded. Families receive compensation when a soldier is killed on the battlefield.

In some Russian regions, recruiters receive a bonus of 100,000 roubles (approximately 1,000 euros) for each recruit they enlist. Once again, the amount depends on the region and its financial resources.

In summary, recruitment faced difficulties in the spring of 2023, but the number of recruits increased significantly in the year's second half. The main reasons for the increase were higher financial incentives, improved cooperation between various government agencies and enhanced control over the recruitment process at all levels. As a result of these efforts, Russia has managed to recruit at least as many contract soldiers as needed to compensate for losses on the battlefield and create some new units, such as the 40th Army Corps and the 25th Combined Arms Army, both of which, however, are reported to be understaffed.

Given the mass of people mobilised or recruited in 2023, the question inevitably arises: Why did Russia manage to achieve only tactical victories, like the capture of Bakhmut, throughout the year?

Although the Russian Armed Forces have sought to provide some military training to create combat-ready units after mobilisation and recruitment, military training requires time and competent instructors. The length of training provided primarily depends on the situation in frontline units and the urgency of restoring combat strength. Since frontline units have suffered significant daily losses in personnel (sometimes up to 1,000 soldiers per day), many mobilised and recruited individuals have been sent to the front with only basic training. However, some units have received several months of training before being deployed. Another major issue in conducting training has been the shortage of qualified instructors (officers). Many instructors were either on the frontlines or had been injured or killed, resulting in poor-quality training.

Consequently, the Russian Armed Forces have been unable to build combat-ready units during the conflict. Those mobilised or recruited have been sent to the front to conduct offensive operations, which are essentially joint and combined arms operations, and they

have failed due to their poor preparation. Inadequate training has led to significant losses in personnel and equipment. In 2023, the Russian Armed Forces achieved only tactical victories but fell short of strategically significant territorial gains. Nonetheless, they were relatively successful in repelling Ukrainian counterattacks from statically prepared defensive positions, which did not require highly trained units.

In summary, Russia probably managed to recruit approximately 300,000 contract soldiers in 2023. This massive recruitment effort did not create significant tensions in Russian society, unlike the partial mobilisation in 2022. Rebuilding the military forces through mobilisation and recruitment has been one of the most crucial strategic lessons for Russia from the war in Ukraine. The outcomes of this effort are expected to inform its conduct in future conflicts, both in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Russia demonstrated its ability to enlist large numbers of individuals through mobilisation or by recruiting them with the help of substantial financial incentives compared with the average income. However, fortunately for Ukraine, Russia has struggled to adequately train this mass of people to function as cohesive units.

Replenishing the Russian Armed Forces personnel and maintaining the morale of frontline units primarily hinges on the Kremlin's ability to sustain generous salaries and allowances from the state budget.

As long as the contract soldier recruitment system functions effectively, Russian leadership can postpone the risk of resorting to another wave of forced mobilisation, which could be politically precarious. However, the Kremlin must be aware that financing the ongoing war in Ukraine increasingly diverts resources from other societal needs, potentially testing society's tolerance.

In 2024, Russia will likely continue making tactical advancements, but it is unlikely to carry out well-led and coordinated offensive operations with major units formations. Russia is likely to persist with its extensive attrition-based warfare against Ukraine throughout the year, and Ukraine's resilience largely depends on financial and military assistance from the West. If Western aid diminishes significantly in the coming years, Russia will be more likely to gradually occupy large Ukrainian territories with a massive, unskilled force, imposing unfavourable peace terms on Ukraine.

Recruitment posters pledge to turn contract soldiers into millionaires, but the more probable outcome is that a healthy individual is reduced to a cripple.

Source: Vkontakte