

# One Hundred Days in Ukraine

## Blitzkrieg, Stalemate, Deadlock

---

*Jahangir E. Arasli*

---

*“Wars begin at the will of anyone, but they do not end at anyone’s will.”*

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* III.7

Two *Forbes* headlines three months apart: “Will Russia Invade Ukraine? (12 February 2022) and “Will the Ukrainian Army Invade Russia? (16 May 2022). And today, on 3 June 2022, the European (a.k.a. the Russo-Ukrainian) war turned one hundred days old. Within this period, its trajectory has been remarkable: from a botched blitzkrieg to an evident stalemate. At the moment, Russia continues pressing but cannot defeat Ukraine. Meanwhile, Ukraine fights back but cannot harm Russia enough to force it to turn to a political solution. Against this background of the war having entered into a phase of deadlock, this analytic policy brief evaluates the operational environment, both belligerents’ strategies, and options in the new setting.

### *Fields of Donbass: Iron, Fire, and Will*

In mid-May 2022, the Russian forces finally launched their much-expected general offensive in the Donbass in order to regain their lost strategic initiative, defeat the best Ukrainian frontline forces, and “liberate” the areas, claimed by the proxy Donetsk and Lugansk “people’s republics” as their own. The fierce battle along the frontline arc (slightly longer than 100 kilometers) is still in motion. The terrain is complex: the area of operations is heavily urbanized, packed with vegetation, and abundant in fluvial barriers.

This complicates maneuverability and involves close-quarter battles. Russian forces have to pave their way through heavily fortified Ukrainian positions in towns and settlements, which they are doing in the traditional style by using enormous firepower

---

*Jahangir E. Arasli is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University and a former Adviser on International Issues in the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author, who may be contacted at [jahangir\\_arasly@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:jahangir_arasly@yahoo.co.uk). The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.*

supplied by hundreds of tanks, artillery batteries, and multiple rocket launchers. Russia's close air support is rather limited due to the risk posed by modern air-defense systems supplied to Ukraine by the West. The Ukrainian forces have put up stiff resistance, applying precise fire tactics supported by accurate intelligence data, and counterattacking where possible or retreating to the next defensive line where needed. As of this writing, Russian gains are of a tactical nature only despite the fact that they have taken several towns (raised to the ground) and enveloped some others. So far, despite of the size of committed forces, the Russian command remains has not yet found a breakthrough point, and it has not yet succeeded in encircling its adversary's forces—as had been planned. Instead, it has had to squeeze the Ukrainian forces out of their positions by frontal attacks, applying costly “salami tactics” (i.e., gaining ground piece by piece). The losses from both sides are heavy, in both personnel and equipment. Hitherto, despite of the gravity of the situation, the strategically defining moment in this war is not yet manifest—even if the Russian forces take more ground in Donbass next weeks. A bridge too far, perhaps...

Beyond Donbass, there have been few developments of late. The fall of the last Ukrainian stronghold in Mariupol after more than two months of resistance in total isolation from the mainland produced a narrow effect on ongoing operations. This is to be understood in contrast to its symbolic significance, which each side tries to exploit for political and psychological warfare purposes. In the area of Kharkov, the Ukrainian forces have reached the state border with Russia in some sectors. Settlements close to the Russian side of this border now sporadically come under fire from the Ukrainian side. In the southern sector and in the Black Sea area the engagements are rather limited, as the two foes are focusing on the Donbass theatre at present. In the meantime, the Russian air force and Russian missile units continue to methodically hit critical Ukrainian infrastructure in the rear without making a distinction between military and civilian targets.

### *Surrogate Mobilization: Is the Sword Bent?*

The ability of Russia to sustain effectively and continuously its war effort in Ukraine is a key element of the puzzle: it will determine whether and when the Kremlin will opt to turn its attention to political solutions. This subject requires closer examination.

On 22 May 2022, a Russian SU-25 air attack jet was shot down over Donbass and the pilot was killed. Was this a routine combat episode? No. The pilot was a 63-year-old retired Major General (!) who had re-entered active service after having previously been discharged for a misdemeanor. This peculiar incident reflects the grand problem that Russia faces after its initial strategic plan in Ukraine went astray: it does not have sufficient cadres at its disposal for a war of such magnitude. There are not enough boots on the ground. There is an insufficient quantity of trained and combat-ready reserves. And the number of officers and sergeants to command the newly raised units or to fill the void created by combat losses (especially at platoon and company commander levels)

is inadequate. All this puts a strategic dilemma in front of the top Russian leadership: to continue the one-legged campaign or turn to total war. Total war requires, inter alia, mass mobilization.

Before the start of the Donbass offensive, the Russian high command started to scratch at all the remaining units, digging deep into military schools, training centers, and even warship crews (akin to World War Two) in the search for personnel in order to back-fill the already depleted field forces. In addition, mercenaries belonging to the Wagner Group are redeploying to Ukraine from Libya, Syria, Central African Republic, and perhaps elsewhere, thus upsetting the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions. Russia's lack of battlefield success and its increasing personnel needs entail bringing more "bayonets" to the war zone. The issue of mobilization is floating in Russian headquarters, decisionmaking circles, and the media. However, mobilization is a mixed blessing: it may potentially cause political problems for the regime, especially after battle-hardened veterans return back to their homes from front-line service. Furthermore, the sanctions-battered Russian economy would be hard-pressed to handle the absence of tens of thousands of employees, not to mention the logistical nightmare of mass mobilization.

Thus, because of political caveats, Russia is conducting a covert or "surrogate" mobilization effort instead of the full-sized one. This has multiple facets. The government issues a call for volunteers that offers various benefits and incentives, while restrictions related to age, citizenship, and criminal record are being de facto removed. A growing number of obituaries originating from the battle zone refer to individuals born in the 1960s and the 1970s. Retired veterans, Cossacks, militant political activists, and guest workers from Silk Road region states—even societal dropouts—are all welcomed in the recruitment offices.

In parallel, a military draft is underway. This does not seem to be a popular endeavor, as people appear to be dodging the draft. For example, of some 29,000 eligible individuals in Sankt-Petersburg, only 7,000 reported to the recruitment commissions as required. Moreover, there have been 16 recorded firebomb attacks against recruitment offices throughout Russia in the past couple of months. In trying to meet draft quotas, the authorities have resorted to pressing age-appropriate civilians into military service in some regions (e.g., Chechnya and Dagestan). The core concern, though, is that these military newbies are undergoing a rushed and thus incomplete training cycle, which suggests that they will not be fully ready to engage effectively in combat. In some ways, this is reminiscent of 1941, when the peacetime cadres of the Red Army were all but lost to the German invasion and then needed to be replaced by a citizen force.

Insufficient manpower is not the only problem in sustaining the Russian war effort. Another one is hardware. Russia has committed its most sophisticated weapons and equipment to the "special military operation" and parts of these warmaking materials have already been lost, damaged, or seized by its foe. That reality is compelling Moscow to ac-

tivate older hardware from the storage facilities—including the less protected T-62 main battle tanks produced in the 1960s and the 1970s, and even ML-20 152-mm howitzers designed in 1937(!). The Russian forces are running out of their already limited stocks of long-range ground- and air-launched and seaborne missiles (some 2,500 of which have been fired as of late May 2022), pushing them to use the older and less-precise types, such as the X-22 designed in the 1970s as U.S. aircraft carriers “killers.” Russia will unlikely be able to replenish its stocks anytime soon due to the Western-led sanctions regime. For instance, the X-101 aerial cruise missile has no less than 35 U.S.-made electronic chips and semiconductors, while each KA-52 Alligator attack helicopter contains by 22 American chips and a South Korean-made one.

A third major challenge remains logistics. Gambling on a short blitzkrieg campaign by tank wedges and airborne assaults, the Russian command misplaced the small essentials. Now the army has to collect drones, GPS- and radio-sets, tactical kits, medical packs, and many other requisites via crowd funding and other informal ways.

Thus, in the next months, Russia will have to endure its war effort (if it will be willing to do so) with foot soldiers, trained and motivated below standards; older weapons; and continuously insufficient supply and logistic systems. That would imminently lead to human and technological “degradation” of warfare from the Russian side. The war would become less regular, even more brutal, indiscriminate, and increase the likelihood of violations of the Geneva Conventions.

## *Two Strategies: Buying Time for the Victory*

What is the general strategic vector of Russia at the current phase, after it had to minimize its initial goals and objectives?

It appears to be reflexive, short-termed, and influenced by political necessity over military feasibility.

All stakes now are on a decisive breakthrough in Donbass. If this is achieved, then a decision fork will present itself. Moscow may claim victory, switch to a defensive mode, and try to secure its military gains (e.g., the overland corridor to Crimea and the entire Donbass region) at the negotiating table. Alternatively, the Kremlin may opt to take control over additional territories, conditions permitting. The option of incorporating the newly occupied areas into Russia through “referenda” is also on the table. In a longer perspective, the keystone of the Russian strategy is to play for time in the hope that one or more factors of the current strategic balance will shift in its favor. One such factor is the rising cost of living in Europe and North America that could upset governments and citizens. Another is the looming shortages of energy and food supplies that may cause disturbances and collapses in certain regions

of the world and the accelerated flow of refugees and migrants to the territory of the European Union. A third factor is a deepening disagreement in the Western camp over policy towards the war. Finally, the outcome of the November 2022 mid-term Congressional elections in the United States could potentially complicate the Biden Administration's support for Ukraine. It is uneasy to assess how realistic and rational such strategy based on delayed hybrid effects, but, apparently, there is no other one in Russia's hand.

In contrast, the Ukrainian strategy is more tangible. Kiev is also buying time—but in the pursuit of other ends. While its frontline forces are putting up stiff resistance and absorbing Russian pressures, the rest of the army is expanding through a third wave of mobilization. The establishment of new reserve brigades will soon bring the strength of the ground component of the Ukrainian armed forces (ZSU) to around 700,000 men and women—at least according to Volodymyr Zelenskyy. That is more than the combined ground forces of all NATO member states, minus the United States and Turkey. Meanwhile, the military hardware delivered by the West—including the most sophisticated long-range heavy weapons—flows uninterrupted. On 9 May 2022, the U.S. president signed into law the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022. America has also operationalized the “Ramstein Group”—a coalition of the willing composed of more than 40 countries that support Ukraine militarily whilst bypassing NATO and EU bureaucracies and formalities. So, the ZSU is tasked to fight for each line of defense, gaining time to receive, adopt, and integrate the arriving Western military hardware into their order of battle.

What comes next should Kiev gain qualitative superiority? The current thinking is as follows: Ukraine is not ready to accept peace without victory, i.e., the restoration of its sovereignty and territorial integrity as defined within its constitutional, pre-2014, borders (including Crimea). Depending on its success in containing the Russian blitz and other conditions, the leaders in Kiev may try to consider initiating a counteroffensive to restore control over their lost territories as early as this summer.

However, still it is not possible to forecast surely the future course of action—too many variables may influence it. To mention most important of these:

- Will Russia be able to withstand the cumulative economic, societal, political, and psychological burden of a lengthy war of attrition, international semi-isolation, and partial exclusion from the global economy?
- Will Ukraine retain its national determination and cohesion in a prolonged conflict?
- Will the Western camp remain united in supporting Ukraine, or will it get bogged down in strategy and policy disagreements caused by the political and economic effects of the long war at the national, continental, and global levels?

## Synopsis

- The European war, which is now in its one hundredth day, is progressing. The initial Russian would-be blitzkrieg was eventually transformed into what is effectually a stalemate. Neither side is prevailing decisively in fighting, although Russia maintains the initiative as the attacking side.
- As the war turns into a routine, Russia is resorting to the application of an improvised grand strategy whose primary purpose is the survival of the regime. This will entail any kind of face-saving impression of war “victory.” The stakes for Moscow are existential, while the positive options and exit solutions not visible.
- However, Russia’s apprehension of this conflict as a long -expected war-by-proxy waged by the West causes its determination, bitterness, unpredictability, and zero-sum approach.
- Given the asymmetry of potentials, Russia applies hybrid stratagems against the West, such as the “weaponization” of energy and food factors.
- The Western players, who are trying to keep the conflict in a controlled corridor without crossing red lines, understand and take into account the aforementioned points.
- On the Ukrainian side of the frontline, there is a persisting resolve to conclude the war on Ukrainian terms and conditions. The primary fuel of that resolve is the blood that has been shed in the defense of the homeland as well as Western political, military, and material support.

All this is resulting in an apparent deadlock in the European war, where the endgame scenario is not in sight, as the second hundred days start counting.

For the time being, the outcome of the battle for the Donbass is far from being clear. However, even if Russia prevails in this specific encounter, it will likely be seen as a Pyrrhic victory. History knows many examples of battles won but wars lost (both the Soviet and the American experiences in Afghanistan come to mind). It would not be a stretch to conclude that Russia already lost this war on 24 February 2022 with the first shot being fired, and the whole chain of events in its first one hundred days has only redoubled that effect. As U.S. President Joe Biden said on 3 May 2022 at the private U.S. weapons manufacturing facility that produces the Javelin anti-tank missiles destined for Ukraine, “this war [is] a strategic failure for Russia.”

In the meantime, the European war goes on, sending metastasis around the continent and the globe, while the risk of more escalation scenarios (both horizontal and vertical) persists. The hot summer campaign is ahead. Its developments will be monitored and analyzed in forthcoming analytic policy briefs.