

A photograph showing a person in a dark jacket and hood riding a bicycle on a wet, muddy street. In the foreground, a large, rusted, and destroyed tank is partially visible, its turret and gun barrel prominent. The background features bare trees and a multi-story apartment building under a grey, overcast sky.

Russia's Military Failures in Ukraine: Causes and Consequences

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Executive Summary

One of the main questions about the year-long Russian invasion of Ukraine is why Russia's armed forces have been so unsuccessful from a military point of view. The military command was unable to concentrate its armed forces in the most important areas, to ensure the joint operation of different branches of its forces, to organize proper reconnaissance and air defence, to provide an effective intensity of aviation and artillery strikes or to conduct war using the accomplishments of the revolution in military affairs. The expert community has suggested a wide range of explanations for these failures from the peculiarities of Russian military equipment to comprehensive corruption. The author argues below that the main reason for Russia's military failures in the war against Ukraine is that militarism has become the system of state administration in Russia. In such a system, exclusively military considerations are considered when making the most important decisions, while the economic and social spheres are ignored. Paradoxically, the power hierarchy built in Russia according to the military model distorts even the military information on which the Kremlin bases erroneous decisions such as the plan for the invasion of Ukraine. As a result, the armed forces were given goals that, following the "Serdyukov" reform, they were unable to achieve.

Military Adventurism

The war against Ukraine is still ongoing and its outcome is unknown, but it is already clear that none of the immediate goals set for the Russian troops on 24 February 2022 were reached. "Denazification" and "demilitarization", which President of Russia Vladimir Putin identified as the objectives of the operation, masked the ultimate demand that Kyiv abandon its attempts to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community and protect its sovereignty through defence preparations. In fact, Moscow was seeking regime change in Ukraine but it is now obvious that, having won several significant military victories, Kyiv is not going to capitulate. While repelling the invasion, Ukraine has been more deeply integrated into the NATO military system, through massive arms supplies and the training of personnel, than some of its official members. Russia was unable to establish military control over the full extent of its neighbour's territory, or even most of it. In the eyes of other authoritarian states, Russia has lost its reputation as a great power able to resolve any conflict with military might.

To look back to one year ago, the actions of the Russian military-political leadership appear to be the result of a chain of adventurous decisions in which all the generally accepted ideas about planning and conducting military operations were ignored. These ideas are concisely and clearly embodied in the so-called Powell-Weinberger principles, according to which it is advisable to start a war only when the true vital interests of the state are under threat, and when the political, economic and diplomatic means of eliminating such a threat have been completely exhausted. In addition, it is necessary to ensure full support for the decision to fight both at home and abroad. The armed forces should be given purely military tasks, notably the defeat of an enemy on the battlefield that clearly threatens the security of the state. It is obvious that the reasons for the "special military operation" had nothing to do with any military security rationale. The accusations repeated by the Kremlin's representatives that the United States and the West in general had turned Ukraine into a springboard for the

deployment of their armed forces and weapons, thereby undermining the security of Russia, were totally divorced from reality. Prior to the so-called special military operation, Ukrainian legislation had not even allowed a permanent foreign military presence on its territory.¹ Moreover, when in December 2021 the Kremlin presented its ultimatum to NATO and the United States,² both agreed in principle to discuss guarantees of non-deployment of foreign troops and certain weapons on Ukrainian territory. In the years leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, nothing happened that could be interpreted as an increased military threat to Russia from the West. The measures taken by NATO in response to the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas were limited and sometimes frankly symbolic.

From the point of view of military planning, Putin's special military operation is a classic example of a military escapade. The Kremlin could not or did not want to keep its plans secret. On the eve of the Russian invasion, US intelligence leaked detailed plans of the upcoming operation to the press.³ These details were received fairly sceptically by the expert community. It appeared from the details published that Moscow, which had very limited military resources to establish control over a European country with an area of 603,000 km and a population of 41 million, intended to defeat the Ukrainian army not by concentrating its forces, but by dispersing them. The territory of Ukraine was to be attacked from seven directions.⁴ Most of the expert community concluded that implementation of this scenario was impossible.

To the amazement of experts, Russia's armed forces attacked Ukraine from four directions. This set the stage for disruption of the plans for the Russian offensive from the outset. In modern military history, there are some examples of victories in a situation in which the attacking side has significantly smaller forces than the defending one. In the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, for instance, Saddam Hussein's 400,000-strong army was defeated by the forces of a 100,000-strong US-led coalition. However, the US forces had total qualitative technological superiority over the Iraqi forces, almost total situational awareness on the battlefield, complete air supremacy and the ability to react instantly to any change in the combat situation, which had a strong psychological effect on the enemy.

It is obvious that the Russian forces did not possess any such overwhelming technological superiority over the enemy. Even with control over airspace and superiority in strike weapons at the initial stage of the operation, air and missile strikes against the enemy were not of a totally demoralizing nature. An article in *Voennaya mysl'*, the main theoretical journal of the Russian armed forces, stated with unexpected frankness that: "Strike aviation cannot perform practical tasks in the operational depth of enemy troops...even though on 28 February 2022 the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation reported that Russian aviation had gained air supremacy. ... Even under conditions of air supremacy, strike aircraft cannot even fully

1 <https://iz.ru/1264244/2021-12-14/rada-razreshida-dopusk-innostrannykh-voennykh-na-ukrainu-v-ramkakh-uchenii>

2 Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (draft) https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/1790803/?lang=en; Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees (draft) https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en

3 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war/?itid=hp-top-table-main>

4 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-21/u-s-intel-shows-russian-plans-for-potential-ukraine-invasion?srnd=premium-europe&leadSource=uverify%20wall>

perform tasks on the front line, let alone in the depths of the enemy's territory....The enemy's lack of full-fledged aviation and the presence of even a limited number of air defence systems with effective intelligence support and targeting by NATO means does not allow Russian strike aircraft to perform combat and special tasks effectively. ...The use of high-precision weapons should be measured in dozens, if not hundreds of long-range cruise missiles used in each massive fire strike..."⁵ It is obvious that the Russian troops simply did not have the required number of high-precision strike weapons and guidance systems that could lead to the level of demoralization of the enemy that occurred in the first days and weeks of US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Reports by the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) that under Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's leadership it had increased the number of cruise missiles by "30 times" turned out to be a bluff.⁶ The Russian army groups participating in the invasion did not even possess decisive superiority in the number of personnel.⁷

Most likely, the whole calculation of a quick victory was based not on military analysis, but on false intelligence reports that the population of Ukraine would joyfully welcome "liberation". Based on this hypothesis, military units were supposed to be "reinforcing" the results of a coup d'état that was being fomented by the Russian special services. It is no coincidence that in his televised address after the invasion began, Vladimir Putin directly appealed to the Ukrainian generals to take power away from the "drug-addicted Nazi regime".⁸ These miscalculations are not hidden even in the above-mentioned *Voennaya mys'*: "Assessments of the socio-political situation in Ukraine did not fully correspond with reality....Information about the moral and psychological state of Ukraine's armed forces personnel turned out to be incorrect".⁹ Those who planned the operation clearly counted on Ukraine's organized, centralized defence being destroyed in the first hours and the leadership of Ukraine fleeing the country. Only this can explain the advance by several brigades to the suburbs of Kyiv.¹⁰ These forces had no chance of capturing a city with a population of close to 3 million. Only the expectation of an absence of organized resistance can explain the advance of army columns without proper reconnaissance and air defence cover. As a result, the units intended for the invasion succumbed to numerous artillery ambushes and airstrikes. The obvious lack of preparedness for serious enemy resistance was also evident in the fact that columns of Rosgvardia (anti-riot law-enforcement agency) units followed the first echelon of the advancing troops practically without any heavy weapons.¹¹ These units were intended to control territories already captured, not to carry out their military capture.

War of the Past

During the first period of the war (24 February to early April), Russian troops unsuccessfully tried to capture Kyiv, Kharkiv and Chernihiv, and got stuck on the approaches to these important centres. How the Russian military would have behaved if it had managed to

5 O.V. Yermolin, N.P. Zubov, M.V. Fomin. The Use of Striking Aviation of Aerospace Forces in Future Military Conflicts. "Voennaya mys'" #2, 2023 pp. 25-26 <https://vm.ric.mil.ru/upload/site178/KTKcn4mdSu.pdf>

6 <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/7731685?ysclid=lcdiewoioi553092375>

7 <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/18/world/russia-ukraine-biden-putin>

8 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67851>

9 O.G. Tukmakov. Main Directions of Improvement of Military-Political Work in Preparation of Operations. *Voennaya misl'* #2, pp. 47-48

10 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyiv_offensive_\(2022\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyiv_offensive_(2022))

11 <https://lyubimigorod.ru/novosibirsk/news/15970696?ysclid=lcr2nt623309807186>

dislodge regular Ukrainian forces from cities with millions of citizens can only be guessed at. The Russian army would inevitably have faced resistance from paramilitary Ukrainian formations. Nonetheless, at the earliest stage of the fighting, it was already apparent that Moscow lacked sufficient resources, either human or material, to achieve regime change in Ukraine. As a result, the Kremlin was forced to withdraw troops from Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Sumy, declaring it an act of goodwill.

At the second stage of the war (late spring and summer), the Russian command decided to limit the goal of the operation to establishing control over the Donetsk and Lugansk regions within Ukraine's administrative borders, and maintaining control over the Kherson region and that part of the Zaporozhye region that had already been captured by that time. The main event was the siege and capture of Mariupol, during which the city was almost destroyed. However, there was no significant advance by Russian troops.

The third stage (September to October) was characterized by Ukrainian forces gaining the military initiative. Kiev was able to carry out a mass mobilization and achieve if not superiority, then at least approximate equivalence with Russia in the number of troops involved in hostilities. Faced with an obvious shortage of manpower, the Kremlin was forced to take exceptional measures. Large mercenary formations belonging to the private military company "Wagner" were created from criminals recruited directly from prisons.¹² At the same time, the Ukrainian army began to receive long-range artillery systems, targeting and fire control systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles in significant quantities from Western countries. The complexity of these weapons, which use satellite reconnaissance data from Western states, allowed Ukrainian forces to significantly disrupt the logistical support provided to the Russian troops. Ukraine took advantage of the fact that the Russian command could not effectively support its troops along the 1,600-kilometre line of combat to launch a successful counteroffensive in the direction of Kharkiv. As a result, Russian troops, under threat of encirclement, rolled back to the territory of the former Luhansk region. Soon, an offensive began in the Kherson region, which led to the withdrawal of Russian units to the left bank of the Dnieper. Unable to gain the upper hand, Moscow announced a partial mobilization in September, as a result of which it managed to stabilize the situation and attempt to keep the captured territories under control. According to Shoigu, it was to achieve this task that the additional troops were required.¹³

During the fourth stage (November to the present), hostilities have become a war of attrition as the line of division has stabilized. Bloody battles have unfolded in the Donbas for the cities of Soledar and Bakhmut, even though control over neither is of decisive strategic importance. At the same time, Russia has launched numerous missile strikes on crucial infrastructure, including Ukraine's system of energy generation and supply. The calculation is obvious: loss of heat and light would make the Ukrainian population less able or willing to resist. The Russian side is creating a line of defensive fortifications to gain a foothold in the occupied territories, while both sides are engaged in fierce positional battles and busy recruiting and training reserves.

12 Zaklyuchyonnye prosyat smenit' rezhim na boevoy. https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5329320?from=doc_vrez

13 <https://rg.ru/2022/09/21/shoigu-chastichnaia-mobilizaciia-nuzhna-dlia-kontrolia-osvobozhdennyh-territorij.html?ysclid=lcqkprz7z864741000>

The failures of the Russian army during the military invasion surprised most experts, who had long preferred to believe reports by the Russian MoD of the ever-growing power of its armed forces. It is likely that Putin was also impressed by these reports. As a result, the Russian army was set an impossible task – the capture of a large European country with its official strength of 1.2 million military personnel. (Estimates of its actual strength range from 750–800,00¹⁴ to 900,000.¹⁵) In reality, the task was assigned to a force of no more than 200,000 strong.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Russian-Ukrainian war bears little resemblance to the war of the future. Ultimately, hostilities look more like the battles of the industrial rather than the digital era. The achievements of the revolution in military affairs – the ability to have comprehensive control over the battlefield, and the use of precision weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles – play only a limited role in this war. The fighting is conducted by weapon systems – tanks, multiple rocket launchers, barrel artillery and aircraft – that represent improved types of those which fought the wars of the middle of the 20th century. As a result, the fighting itself is more reminiscent of battles in the Korean War than the US battles with the Iraqi army. However, even if this war is approached by the standards of the 20th century, Russia should still have won: its population is at least three times bigger than Ukraine's, which should theoretically provide significant superiority in manpower, and the production volumes of the Russian defence industry are many times greater than the Ukrainian defence industry.

Serdyukov's Reform

Throughout the year of hostilities, however, the Russian army has won no decisive victories. The reasons for this lie in its development following the break-up of the Soviet Union. In 1991, the new Russian Federation had most of the Soviet armed forces (about 2.8 million military personnel) at its disposal. In terms of structure and organization, these forces were a mass mobilization army. The country's defence was based on its ability to mobilize millions of reservists on the eve of war, during a so-called period of threat. The Soviet peacetime armed forces were a school for the military training of reservists. Military units were staffed by conscripts and there was an almost complete absence of professional sergeants or non-commissioned officers (NCOs). The degree of combat readiness of these formations was determined not by the level of combat training of military personnel, but by the level of staffing. No strategic operation could be carried out without a prior mobilization: the call-up of reservists, staffing them with incomplete formations ("skeleton units") and putting weapons and equipment located in storage bases in order. Such a system works much more effectively in conditions where the authorities have no political opponents, when people called up are deprived of the opportunity to protect their interests and when the state owns all the industrial enterprises in the country. Thus, totalitarianism, the basis of which is the full control of the state over all spheres of life, makes the concept of mass mobilization most effective. In the 1990s and 2000s, however, a market economy developed in Russia, albeit highly a concentrated one, and basic rights and freedoms, as well as the rule of law, were at least declared. Attempts by its generals to preserve the Soviet military system and mass mobilization led the Russian armed forces into a structural crisis that affected all the

14 <https://bmpd.livejournal.com/2984519.html>

15 Military balance 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2022.2078044?src=recsys>

16 <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/18/world/russia-ukraine-biden-putin>

basic principles of its formation. First and foremost, this applied to personnel. Formally, there was universal military service in Russia, but young men of conscription age tried to avoid this by all means possible. The MoD was unable to fill all its positions with conscripts as they did not meet even minimum intellectual, physical or moral requirements. Desertion became endemic because of the appalling conditions. Soldiers left military units in platoons and companies, often going on to commit serious criminal offences.

The combat capability of the Russian armed forces was dramatically reduced, as demonstrated by the two wars in Chechnya. Vladimir Putin understood this well: "In order to effectively repel the terrorists, we needed to put together a group of at least 65,000 men, but the combat ready units in the entire army came to only 55,000 men, and they were scattered throughout the entire country. Our armed forces came to a total of 1,400,000 men but there were not enough men to fight. This is how kids who had never seen combat before were sent in to fight. I will never forget this".¹⁷ In addition, privatized Russian industry was unable to mass produce weapons in numbers that could equip a multi-million-strong army.

It was only after the war with Georgia in 2008 that Russia's military and political leadership understood that despite constant increases in funding of approximately 20 percent per year since 2000, the armed forces remained ineffective. If the enemy had been even just a little stronger, the war might have ended in defeat. Anatoly Serdyukov, who was appointed Defence Minister in 2007, quickly identified the essence of the problem and began a radical military reform. This amounted to a decisive rejection of the concept of a mass mobilization army, which Russia had adhered to for 150 years. The reformers sought to create a compact, mobile army in which all formations and units were fully staffed. In keeping with the demographic situation, this could only be achieved by drastically reducing the number of units. Serdyukov was remarkably successful and a sharp reduction in the number of units and formations left the remaining ones fully staffed. Sergei Shoigu, his successor, pursued a consistent contraction of personnel based on volunteer forces. By the beginning of 2020, the number of contracted troops, at 405,000, significantly exceeded the number of conscripts for the first time.¹⁸ The armed forces arrived at a situation where conscription could be abolished with little damage to security. Military service would be voluntary for those who wanted to serve in the army or law enforcement agencies.

As a result of Serdyukov's reforms, the Kremlin now had up to 20 fully equipped units at its disposal, which made it possible to begin executing a combat order within hours of it being given. Putin, who had long suffered the humiliation of being unable to use military force, immediately set about using these units to achieve his geopolitical goals. In February 2014, Russian troops blockaded the local parliament building in Crimea, cut all transport communications connecting the peninsula with Ukraine and surrounded the garrisons of Ukrainian troops. A year later, Putin acknowledged the role of Russian troops in "the return" of Crimea.¹⁹ In fact, the Russian military had helped several parliamentarians to enter the parliament building,²⁰ call a referendum and formulate "the right questions" for the residents

17 Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. May 10, 2006. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23577>

18 <https://rg.ru/2020/03/25/shoigu-chislo-kontraktnikov-prevysilo-400-tysiach-chelovek.html?ysclid=lcp80ru6g8589929124>

19 http://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/59195

20 http://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/59195

of the peninsula. By then, observers were already noting significant changes in the Russian army since the war with Georgia in 2008.

The operation in Crimea was carried out by well-equipped, disciplined sober troops who were well prepared to fulfil their mission. Even more impressive was the sudden deployment of Russian troops on the Russian-Ukrainian border at the end of February 2014. In 1999 it had taken the General Staff more than two weeks to form and send two battalions of paratroopers to Dagestan, where Chechen militants had broken through. Fifteen years later, over 40,000 troops had been deployed on the border within a day and a half. This was followed by “victories” near Mariupol and in Debaltseve during an undeclared proxy war in the Donbas in 2014–2015. This logically flowed into the dramatic appearance of Russian aircrafts and air defence systems in Syria. These military successes, the source of which was Serdyukov’s reforms, led to clearly inflated and overoptimistic expectations among both experts and the country’s leadership about the effectiveness of Russia’s armed forces and their combat capabilities.

The Country of Victorious Militarism

A successful military reform carried out in the absence of general democratic reforms inevitably led to the transformation of Russia into a militaristic state, just as had happened with Prussia at the beginning of the 19th century. For quite a long time, most political scientists had refused to consider the regime established in Russia to be totalitarian, pointing out that it had no obvious ideology. Now, however, militarism became its ideology. Militarism is a system of views on the structure of the state, its main institutions, and the political and spiritual life of society that gives total priority to military methods of management, and military views and values. In such a state, all political decisions are based on military-technical calculations rather than a multifaceted analysis of state interests. Public opinion is also shaped by military considerations.²¹ Military relations and military values define all spheres of life.²² Anthony Giddens defines militarism as the tendency of the elites in some societies to seek military solutions to political conflicts, and of the lower strata to accept such solutions.²³ There is a fundamental difference between militarism and the drive to strengthen defence capabilities to prepare the army for possible war, which is natural for any country: “The military way is marked by a primary concentration of men and materials on winning specific objectives of power with the utmost efficiency....Militarism, on the other hand, presents a vast array of customs, interests, prestige, actions, and thought associated with armies and wars, and yet transcending true military purposes”.²⁴

The fact that senior military personnel play relatively minor roles in the decision-making process, yielding to former members of the secret services, does not negate the militaristic nature of Russian society. The so-called chekists, who are not strictly speaking professional soldiers, are extremely proud of their official status as military personnel and consider themselves part of the “officer corps”. They are certainly sources of militaristic ideology and

21 *The Political Role of the Military: An International Handbook*. (Greenwood Press 1996), p. 143.

22 *Ibid.*

23 See: Giddens A. *The Nation-State and Violence*. Vol. 2 of *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), p. 80.

24 Alfred Vagts. *A History of Militarism Civilian and Military* (The Free Press, New York, 1967), pp. 13-15.

stereotypes, and carriers of these into all spheres of life. The situation is clarified by Alfred Vagts, author of the classic work on the history of militarism, writing on the essence of civilian militarism and militarists: "Civilian militarism might be defined as the unquestioning embrace of military values, ethos, principles, attitudes; as ranking military institutions and considerations above all others in the state; as finding the heroic predominantly in military service and action, including war—to the preparation of which the nation's main interests and resources must be dedicated. . . .With the soldier militarist, the civilian shares the contempt for civilian politics, parliamentarianism, parties, the hatred of civilian supremacy, of trade, of labor, of diplomacy".²⁵

Putin fits remarkably well Vagts' description of a civilian militarist. It would not be hard for an objective observer to discover in Putin "the unquestioning embrace of military values, ethos, principles, attitudes", as well as "the contempt for civilian politics, parliamentarianism, parties, the hatred of civilian supremacy, of trade, of labor, of diplomacy". "Putin militarism" also grew quite naturally out of national tradition. For three centuries, the Russian state has been interested in any individual primarily as a future soldier, and second as a source of funds for the maintenance of the army. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, it seemed to many researchers that, as a result of the objective processes of Russia's development, Soviet militarism based on conscription — or the ability to make use of a constantly renewable mass of human recruits — was dead. The demographic situation in modern Russia was such that the number of young men aged 18 was almost equal to the number of private soldier and sergeant positions in the armed forces.²⁶ This meant that the concept of a mass mobilization army could not be implemented: there were not enough young men to form the necessary mass of soldiers. It was also obvious that Russian industry would never be able to mass produce enough weapons to equip a multi-million strong army.

It seemed that militarism as historical atavism would disappear by itself, but then a "miracle" happened as a result of the "progressive" military reform and militarism was revived. This "new militarism", which undoubtedly distils all the most conservative trends, is in fact the main threat to Russia. From his earliest days in the Kremlin, Putin began to build a state that seemed to him ideal for governing — he began to create the notorious vertical of power. Putin imagined the best system of governance in Russia to be a strict, military-style hierarchy. At the top of this pyramid is the president, who is also the Commander-in-Chief; below, level by level, there are executive and dedicated officials who can bring the will of the supreme leader to every corner of the vast country. As a result of the construction of this system, power in Russia was again built on the military-feudal principle. Such power, in the view of the Kremlin leaders, is monolithic in nature; its division is considered heresy. This principle of unity of command extends to the political system.

In fact, by removing all checks and balances, massively concentrating power and locking in all important decisions, the leader becomes hostage to the information he receives, and therefore, to his own officials and confidants. The decision to conduct a special military operation was made under the influence of information distorted according to Putin's ideas and prejudices. The FSB forecast of the reaction of the Ukrainian population to the invasion had no connection with reality. Similarly, the bravura reports of the heads of the MoD on the

²⁵ Ibid., p. 453.

²⁶ Cymbal V., Kardashevskij N. Mnogourovnevnyj analiz problem prizyva na voennuyu sluzhbu v Rossii // Voprosy ekonomiki. 2006. No 1. S. 74.

high degree of combat readiness of the armed forces were totally unrealistic. Thus, it was the triumph of militarism as a system of government of the state that led to the creation of a war plan that could never be implemented. In this sense, Valery Gerasimov's ugly creation demonstrated common features with Schlieffen's brilliant plan.

Refusal to Modernize

Serdyukov's reforms led to the creation of effective armed forces, but these forces had a clear purpose: to win a short-term local conflict. Rejection of the concept of mass mobilization was also a rejection of the idea of winning a large-scale war without resorting to nuclear weapons. However, Russia's actions in Ukraine have led to a direct military confrontation with the West. As a result, the army was given tasks that do not meet the vital interests of the country, and that the armed forces cannot fulfil. Such a war requires a much larger number of troops, weapons and military equipment than those at Russia's disposal. The creation of new divisions in the "western direction" was announced back in 2016. An article in *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* announced "eight new operational formations [armies], more than 25 divisions (combined arms, aviation, air defence, surface ships), [and] 15 brigades..."²⁷ In subsequent years, Shoigu regularly announced the creation of new divisions and regiments.²⁸ At an MoD board meeting at the end of December 2022, Shoigu announced plans for an unprecedented build-up of the armed forces, stating the need to increase their size to 1.5 million soldiers.²⁹

Shoigu intends to raise three new motorized rifle and two new air assault divisions, as well as an army corps. Seven motorized rifle brigades and five marine brigades are to be expanded to division level. The minister wants to create a mixed aviation division and another army aviation brigade numbering 80–100 combat helicopters for each of the ten combined-arms armies and one tank army. In addition, eight bomber aviation regiments, one fighter aviation regiment and six army aviation brigades are to be formed. Finally, an artillery division and a "high-capacity" artillery brigade will be formed in each of the military districts.

If the leadership of the MoD seriously intends to create and arm these formations, these plans are doomed to inevitable failure. In recent years, the military has been able to recruit no more than 250,000 conscripts per year. If the law is not radically changed, and deferrals from conscription are not cancelled, it will be impossible to increase the armed forces without extending the conscription term. It is no coincidence that immediately after Shoigu's speech, the Chair of the Defence Committee of the State Duma, General Andrei Kartoplov, announced the need to raise the draft age to 30 years (it is currently 27).³⁰ Other representatives of the committee raised the need to extend the term of conscription from one year to 18 months or two years.³¹ However, it is unlikely that these measures will significantly increase the size of the armed forces. Instead, they will cause new waves of emigration and

27 Nikolaj Poroskov. Nekolokol'nye interesy Rossii. // *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* 19.02. 2016

28 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/04/2021/607f76469a7947673e882b24?ysclid=lcw9vls9c562770176;>
<https://ria.ru/20220520/armiya-1789685363.html?ysclid=lcwvhvzbzl332816074>

29 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70159>

30 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/12/01/2023/63c038ce9a79471ca84c2eeb?ysclid=lcuitisq6n933332714>

31 <https://www.amic.ru/news/obschestvo/prizyv-do-30-i-dva-goda-sluzhby-kakie-izmeneniya-mogut-sluchitsya-v-rossiyskoy-armii-v-2023-godu-516399?ysclid=lcuix4wkrm223639301>

a revival of the corrupt industry of exemption from army service that existed in the 1990s and 2000s.

It is also doubtful that the build-up can be achieved at the expense of military personnel serving under contract. Even if a miracle happens and the number of contracted soldiers can be increased by 290,000 to bring it to 695,000, as Shoigu plans, it will not be possible to achieve the required number of 1.5 million soldiers and officers.

The only logical conclusion is that the MoD assumes that it will be able to draw replenishment from the “mobilization resource” and make mobilization permanent. Even with the difficult demographic situation and the lack of 18-year-olds required for conscription, there are 7.2 million men aged 17–29 in Russia. They will account for most of those whom Shoigu intends to attract to the armed forces. About 18 million more are 30–44 years old, and can be mobilized, at least in theory.³² At the same time, of the 7 million in the first group, less than 2 million have completed military service and have at least some military training. Thus, a return to the model of a mass mobilization army will result in the armed forces being replenished by men with no military training at all. The problem is even more serious as there are no junior officers or NCOs to command these totally untrained troops. In addition, most of the divisions and brigades created will inevitably be skeleton units.

An additional source of the military failure was that the reform of the armed forces was interrupted in 2012 without having tackled the most important elements of the military structure: the command-and-control system of the armed forces. There has been no separation of the military and political leadership of the country. As far as it is possible to understand, there has never been a clear division of functions even between the MoD and the General Staff. The command system is extremely confusing. For example, the Main Directorate of Combat Training is part of the MoD while the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate is part of the General Staff. This has led to obvious problems during the mobilization campaign.

The current system of leadership of the special military operation appears to be the result of strange improvisations. For the first seven months of the operation there was no official information about any joint command of Russian troops in Ukraine. It looked as if leadership was in the hands of the commanders of the four military districts. Each of these generals led the units sent from their district. Aviation and the navy were subordinated to their superiors. General command of the operation at that time was presumably carried out by the General Staff. Finally, on 8 October 2022 General Sergei Surovikin was appointed commander of the integrated group of troops, and a hitherto unknown body, “the joint headquarters of the branches of the armed forces involved in the special military operation”, was created. The existence of this joint headquarters became known only from reports of Putin’s visit to it.³³ On 11 January 2023 Shoigu appointed Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov as commander of the integrated group of troops in Ukraine and Sergei Surovikin was demoted to the position of deputy. The MoD explained that “the higher level of military command in the special military operation is related to the broader scope of missions tackled in its course and the need to organize closer coordination between military branches and services of the armed forces and also the increased quality of all types of logistics support and efficiency

32 https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/Bul_chislen_nasel-pv_01-01-2022.pdf

33 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70098>

in command and control of the groups of troops (forces)".³⁴ We can conclude that the work of this headquarters has been recognized as unsatisfactory, and that general command has been moved (or returned) to the General Staff. At the very least, it means that the Russian command system until then had not reached the level of a joint operation, which integrates units of different branches and services under a single command. Gerasimov has now been assigned "to organize closer coordination between military branches and services" – a goal that should have been achieved before the "operation" began.

One of the main reasons for Russian military failure is the desire to preserve the archaic military culture at any cost. First, there is the requirement that any order from a senior commander be carried out fully and unconditionally. This situation was very accurately described by the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army, General Zaluzhny, when he characterized his opponent Viktor Surovikin: "The Soviet Army [welcomes] and [enforces] one concept: the commander. But being a commander and being a leader is not the same. With all due respect to Mr Surovikin ..., if you look at him, he is an ordinary Petrovite commander from Peter the Great's time, shall we say, a Derzhimorda [the brutal martinet in Gogol's *The Government Inspector*]. You look at him and understand that either you complete the task, or you're fucked".³⁵

In modern warfare, however, the situation changes so rapidly that rigorous adherence to previous orders inevitably leads to defeat. The requirement to follow an order unconditionally deprives Russian officers of initiative and personal responsibility, and the ability to make independent decisions. Independence in decision-making while implementing a combat task is the key to success in network-centric warfare. This concept assumes that the achievements of the revolution in military affairs (satellite reconnaissance and communications, the use of drones etc.) mean that each combatant receives comprehensive information and makes decisions based on it. The Ukrainian army is currently trying to implement such a concept.³⁶ It appears that the Russian army is unable to implement this. The Russian MoD has been trying to create a modern command and control system for many years but without success. This failure is understandable. The concept of network-centric warfare is incompatible in principle with its archaic military culture focused on a mass mobilization army and on permanent superiority of numbers over the enemy.

Back to the USSR?

The transition to a mass mobilization army will inevitably require fundamental changes in the organization of industry and property rights, which will mean changes to the internal structure of the Russian state. The current level of military production does not correspond at all with Shoigu's plans to increase the size of the armed forces. Russian industry is clearly incapable of providing more than 25 new divisions with not even modern, but at least new equipment and weapons. For example, 800 helicopters will be required to support the army aviation brigades currently being formed, but only 400 are available and no more than 100 are produced each year.³⁷

34 <https://tass.com/politics/1561153?ysclid=lcujy1o04x460055710>

35 <https://www.economist.com/zaluzhny-transcript>

36 https://www.ng.ru/armies/2023-02-05/2_8652_kiev.html

37 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2022/12/22/956473-minoboroni-obyavilo-ob-uvelichenii->

Only industry arranged in a certain way can provide a mass mobilization army with the huge amounts of weapons and military equipment it needs. An ideal example of such an organization of production is Soviet-era industry, based on a so-called planned economy and autarky. In the Soviet Union, there was no division between the civil and military sectors of industry. Only the final assembly plants belonged to the official defence industry, while most components for armaments and military production were manufactured at “civilian” factories. This naturally affected the quality and price of civilian goods. Such production could exist only in the presence of the State Planning Committee (Gosplan), which allocated funds, set all prices for raw materials, the industrial base, and various components, thereby ensuring the required level of surplus. In the 1990s, most of the Soviet-era industries collapsed. A smaller number were repurposed to produce other products. The current owners of private enterprises do not need defence orders and any attempt to enforce these will inevitably make their main products more expensive and therefore less competitive. It is no coincidence that even before the war, there were government proposals to establish a duty of private sector manufacturers to produce military products, which they diligently avoided. In the spring of 2022, parliament adopted a law according to which owners “regardless of the organizational and legal form and form of ownership have no right to refuse to conclude state contracts. In addition, according to the submission of law enforcement agencies, the government may voluntarily increase or decrease the quantity of goods, and the amount of work or services required within the framework of the State Defense Order”.³⁸ These are just the first steps towards the structural militarization of the country's economy. Any attempt to switch industrial production along military lines in the face of Western sanctions is likely to rapidly and significantly worsen Russia's economic crisis.

It is no coincidence that government officials from the economic sector are highly sceptical about the very idea of militaristic mobilization of the economy. First Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Belousov admitted recently: “I think that there is no sense in us creating a mobilization economy now, we simply will not be able to do it....The mobilization economy is part of a mobilization society”. However, he added that it is “always a militarized story, it is a rejection of personal interests in relation to state interests, the strict prevalence of state [interests]”.³⁹ Thus, a high-ranking official, not a liberal, quite rationally believes that Russian society, which has enjoyed the fruits of the market economy, is not yet ready to give these up.

Conclusions

- The war against Ukraine was the only possible result of the domestic and foreign policy of the militaristic state created by Vladimir Putin. A militaristic state prefers military means to any other for resolving any foreign or domestic policy issue.
- In full accordance with the typical scheme of development of such a state, the armed forces were eventually assigned tasks that they were not capable of carrying out. The structure of Russia's armed forces before the war was the result of Serdyukov's reforms of 2008–2012. Rejection of the concept of mass mobilization was also a rejection of the

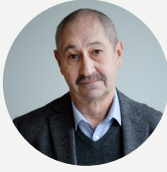
[chislennosti-armii](https://chislennosti-armii.ru/)

38 <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/155680-8>

39 <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16697729>

idea of winning a large-scale war without resorting to nuclear weapons. No modern army has the resources to conduct successful combat operations on the scale of the war that is currently being waged in Ukraine.

- This war has exposed the weaknesses of the Russian army, which can be explained by the fact that Serdyukov's reforms were not completed but at some point came into conflict with the archaic structure of the Russian state. The Kremlin is looking for a way out in a complete rejection of the modernization of the armed forces and a return to the concept of mass mobilization. In this case, a return to Soviet-era conditions will be essential: a tightening of the laws on military service, the nationalization of private enterprises, a return to a planned economy and the restoration of a unified ideology.
- However, the above will be impossible to implement due to demographic change and the current state of Russian industry. Even the attempted sharp turn in military build-up will inevitably cause chaos.
- The fact that Russia, like any other state, is unable to win such a war will sooner or later become a crisis, possibly leading to the collapse of existing command structures. By then the authorities will face an uncontrollable mass of armed people from among the mobilized and released prisoners.



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