

WAR IN UKRAINE

SOCIOCULTURAL RUNNING ESTIMATE

Year 2 in Review



More than two years ago, on February 24, 2022, Russia initiated its “special military operation” (SMO) in Ukraine, marking the onset of Eastern Europe’s first significant conflict in decades. Despite his historical claims of kinship and unity with Ukrainians, Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized an assault to absorb Ukraine as part of Russia. Putin’s aggression toward Ukraine ostensibly results from its attempts to forge closer ties with the West, moves that Russia perceives as threats to its security and its society. The annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas in 2014 underscored Russia’s aggressive posture and served as a precursor to the more extensive invasion in 2022. To this date, the Kremlin continues to justify its invasion as

a measure to demilitarize Ukraine and eradicate “Nazi” influences while preventing Ukraine from eventually joining the European Union (EU) and, more importantly, NATO.

As the war passes its second anniversary, the conflict appears entrenched in a stalemate, with neither side securing a definitive victory. Yet, Russia maintains momentum through incremental territorial conquests, while suffering high costs in casualties and equipment losses. Ukraine’s summer 2023 counteroffensive, which aimed to reclaim vast swaths of territory, did not do much to change this trajectory. Instead, failing to achieve desired objectives has led to a defensive fallback amidst substantial losses and leadership changes.

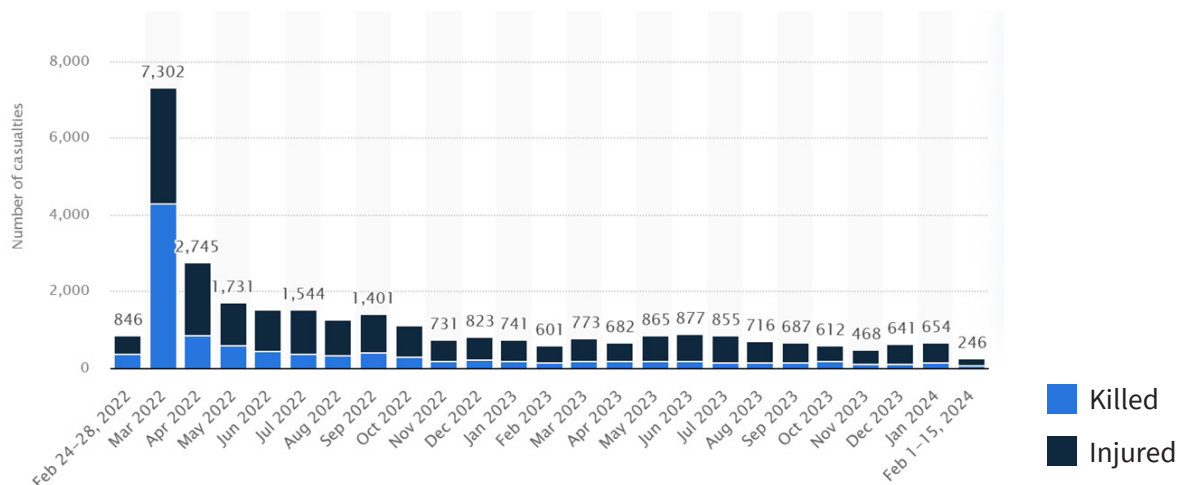


Figure 1. Number of Ukrainian civilian casualties during the war in Ukraine monthly 2022-2024.¹

This situation underscores the significant resource disparity between Russia and Ukraine, which has been mitigated by substantial Western support, including military aid, economic sanctions against Russia, and diplomatic efforts to isolate Russia internationally. Despite seemingly insurmountable challenges, Ukraine’s determination

against an existential threat, bolstered by this support, has allowed it to withstand the onslaught. However, the human cost of the conflict has been massive, with hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides, affecting not only combatants but also causing widespread civilian deaths, suffering, displacement, and infrastructure destruction.

The dynamic of the conflict evolved markedly from the first to the second year, with the nature of combat and the strategic posture of both sides undergoing significant changes. In the initial year, Ukraine’s defensive resilience in thwarting Russia’s territorial ambitions represented a critical achievement, successfully delaying the aggressor’s advances and securing key positions, including Kyiv. During the second year, Ukraine adopted a more offensive strategy, but its ambitious summer counteroffensive ultimately failed. This shift toward a combined defense and strategic offense delineated a new phase in the conflict, characterized by escalating casualties and an intensity of fighting not seen in the first year, such as the battles for Bakhmut and Avdiivka. Meanwhile, the war’s deepening impact on Russia became evident through the unprecedented mutiny by PMC Wagner, signaling internal dissent and operational challenges within Russian ranks. This evolution from a predominantly defensive stance to an assertive offensive approach, coupled with the increased toll on both sides and the stirring of mutiny, underscored the second year’s departure from the first, highlighting the increasing desperation and measures taken to maintain momentum as well as the growing complexities in sustaining military campaigns.

Internationally, the conflict has prompted a widespread response, including UN resolutions and peace initiatives, though a negotiated end remains elusive. Significantly, because of its prolonged nature, the war has substantially impacted domestic politics and public opinion within both Russia and Ukraine, stirring protests, political opposition, and shifts in public sentiment. Russia’s war strategy and tactics ignited explosive frustrations, sparking a brief but socially significant armed rebellion as Wagner mercenaries marched on Moscow, presenting an unparalleled challenge to the Kremlin’s iron grip on power. The future of the conflict, fraught with escalation risks and the potential for broader regional involvement, remains uncertain, especially with the 2024 U.S. presidential elections potentially impacting military aid to Ukraine.

As the war enters its third year, the strategic landscape is likely to shift dramatically, with the West’s influence and support for Ukraine continuing to be a critical factor in the conflict. The war not only poses an existential threat to Ukraine but will also impact European security interests and the international order, highlighting the urgent need for a sustainable and peaceful resolution.

ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

The second year of the Russia-Ukraine conflict intensified into a devastating stalemate, with Russia’s pyrrhic territorial advances starkly contrasted by Ukraine’s determined defense and marked by significant losses on both sides. Ukraine’s counteroffensive stumbled, leading to a defensive fallback amid heavy casualties and a change in

overall military leadership. The war’s brutal toll, exacerbated by resource disparities and sustained by Western support for Ukraine, highlighted a grim picture of attrition. There is still not a clear path to victory or peace for either side in this period of profound geopolitical turmoil and human suffering.

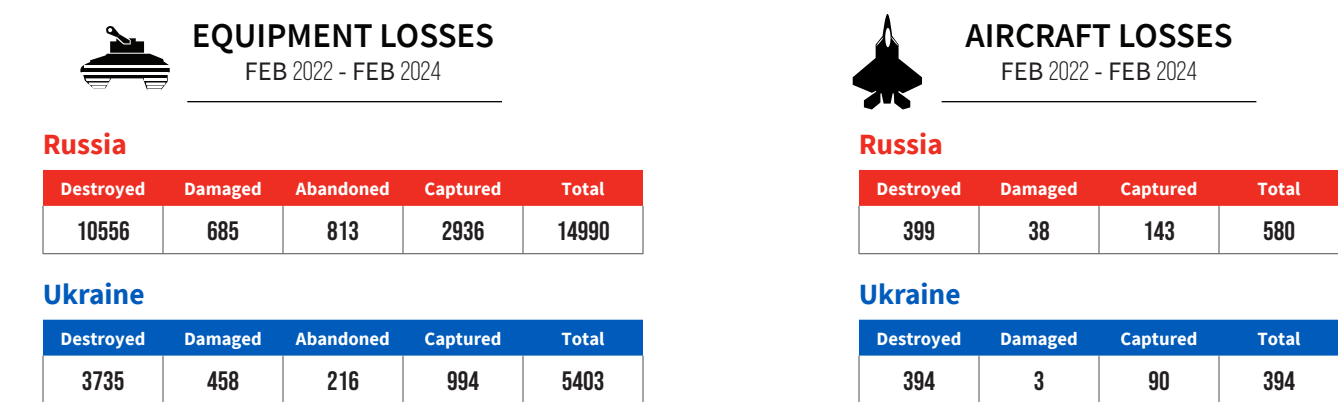


Figure 2. Russian and Ukrainian Equipment Losses. (Source Oryx)²

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

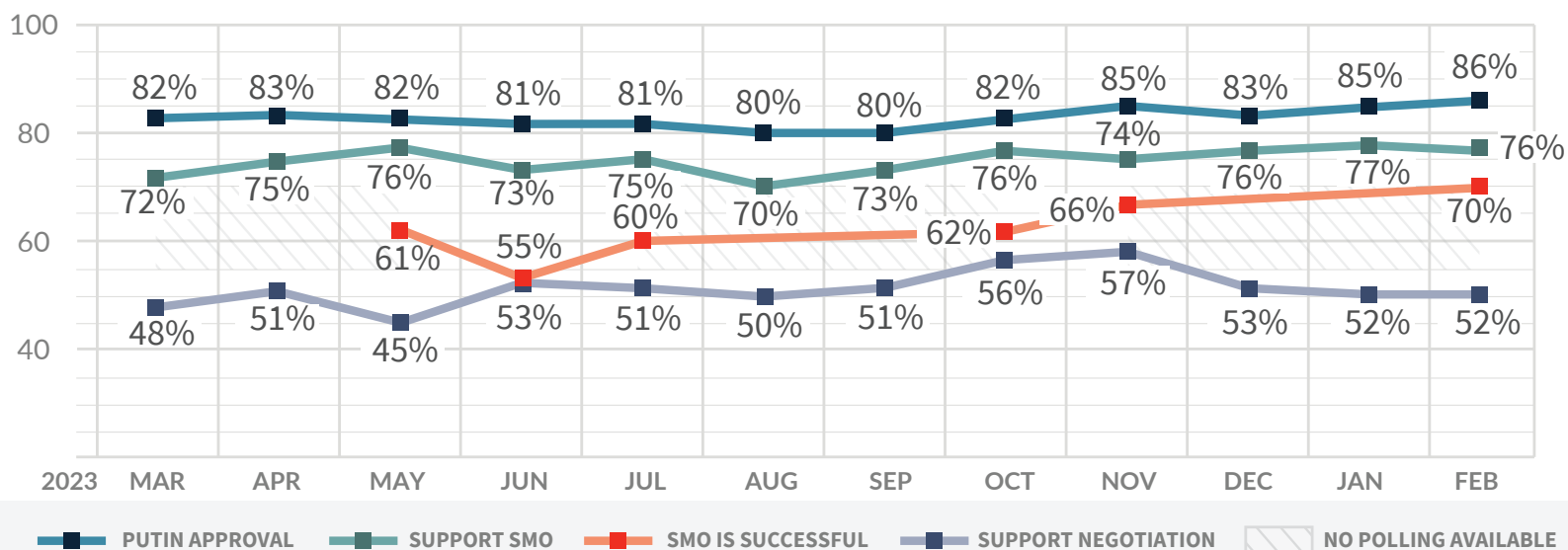


Figure 3. Domestic Russian Perceptions Polling Update 2023-2024.³

NOTE: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.



PUTIN APPROVAL

In the first year of the SMO, an average of 82.5% of Russians approved of Putin. In the second year, the average approval remained virtually the same at 82.7%.



SUPPORT SMO

**75.9%
YEAR 1**



**74.4%
YEAR 2**

Russian popular support for the SMO averaged 75.9% for the first year, decreasing slightly to an average of 74.4% for the second year.

SUPPORT NEGOTIATION

**50.3%
YEAR 1**



**51.6%
YEAR 2**

In limited polling during the first year of the SMO, 50.3% of Russians supported a negotiated end to the conflict. In the second year, this average increased slightly to 51.6%.

Figure 4. Comparison of Year 1 to Year 2 Averages of Russian Polling Topics.⁴

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Russian Hearts and Minds: The Paradox of War Support and Desire for Peace

The domestic Russian perception of the war with Ukraine creates a complex tapestry of support, uncertainty, skepticism, and yearning for peace. Throughout the second year of the conflict, President Putin's approval ratings soared, consistently remaining above 80% and peaking at 86% in February 2024. Similarly, public support for the war was robust, exceeding 70% and reaching 77% in certain months. Despite this apparent public endorsement, another dichotomy emerged within the populace's sentiment, with more than half expressing a preference for a negotiated end to the hostilities over continued aggression. This stance stayed above 50% throughout the year and climbed to 57% in November 2023. Demographic nuances further accentuate this divide; older Russians (55+ years) showed higher approval of Putin and support for the war, whereas younger Russians (18-24 years) demonstrated a greater inclination toward negotiation rather than prolonged conflict. Women, individuals disapproving of Putin, and those sourcing their news from alternatives to state-controlled television notably favored a peaceful resolution, revealing a society that, while outwardly supportive of its leadership's military endeavors, internally harbors a significant desire for the cessation of violence and a diplomatic pathway forward.⁵

David vs. Goliath: Ukraine-Russia Resource Disparity and War Outcomes

Resource disparity between Russian and Ukrainian troops is stark. Russia's vast military, economic, and population resources dwarf those of Ukraine, significantly impacting the dynamics of the conflict. Western support has been pivotal in bridging this gap, providing Ukraine with essential military aid, financial assistance, and advanced technologies that have sustained its resistance and enabled several strategic counteroffensives. This support has been central to Ukraine's ability to counter Russian offensives, maintain its defense lines, and, in some cases, reclaim lost territories. Without continued Western support, Ukraine will suffer from a widened resource

gap, which could severely hamper its ability to continue resistance or pursue its ambitions of reclaiming all lost territories. Without Western support the course of the conflict would likely shift in favor of Russia, undermining Ukrainian sovereignty and reshaping the geopolitical balance in the region. This underscores the critical role sustained international assistance plays in ensuring Ukraine's resilience against a better-resourced adversary, highlighting the broader strategic stakes for the EU, NATO, and the United States, as well as the principles of international law and national sovereignty.

Stalled Momentum: A Counteroffensive's High Hopes and Hard Realities

Ukraine's highly anticipated summer 2023 counteroffensive ultimately fell short of its strategic objectives despite significant preparation and the considerable attrition of Russian troops and equipment. Ukraine's failure to break through Russian defenses allowed Russia to regroup, re-strategize, and gain incremental momentum, pushing Ukraine back into a defensive posture. The counteroffensive's outcome calls attention to the challenges of supporting Ukraine against a resilient and adaptive adversary, highlighting the need for sustained military aid and strategic planning to counter Russian advances. The setback also reveals the war's unpredictable nature and its capacity to alter regional security architectures, necessitating a recalibration of NATO's defensive strategies on its eastern flank. Moreover, it serves as a crucial reminder of the enduring complexities of modern warfare, where technological superiority and international support alone cannot guarantee victory. This development could lead to a more cautious approach from European nations and NATO, wary of the long-term commitment required and the strategic implications of a protracted conflict on the continent's security landscape.

Shadow Warriors' Revolt: The Unlikely Wagner Mutiny Against the Kremlin



The aftermath of the June 2023 PMC Wagner mutiny against the Kremlin highlights the unpredictable potential of Putin's leadership. The rebellion, orchestrated by the late Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, notorious for his close ties to Putin and his mercenary empire, took a dramatic turn with Prigozhin's death in a plane crash—a fate many believe was an assassination orchestrated by Putin to eliminate a potential rival who had become too powerful and audacious. When Wagner, a shadowy private military company known for

its brutal, amoral efficiency in conflicts across the globe, turned its guns toward Moscow, directly challenging the Kremlin's ironclad rule, it sealed its leader's fate. The uprising of battle-hardened mercenaries led by Prigozhin not only exposed deep rifts within Russia's military fabric but also underscored the precarious balance of power in Russia, revealing the extent of discontent brewing among those once deemed the most loyal enforcers of Kremlin interests. The rebellion and Prigozhin's sudden death under suspicious circumstances illuminated the volatile dynamics of the Kremlin, the military, oligarchs, and private military forces, casting a stark light on the dangerous intersections of power, loyalty, and ambition within Putin's Russia.⁶

Crossroads of Commitment: The Role of International Aid to the War

In the second year of the conflict, the once-unwavering commitment of international aid to Ukraine began to show signs of fluctuation, marking a stark contrast to the first year, which saw unprecedented levels of global support and aid commitment. This shift has been crucial in determining Ukraine's military capacity and capabilities against Russia, highlighting the importance of continuous support in providing military, economic, and technological

assistance. The wavering aid threatens to weaken Ukraine's defense and resolve and alter the strategic calculus of the conflict, emphasizing how the augmentation of physical capabilities directly influences both the will to fight and potential outcomes. The variability of aid illuminates the broader geopolitical implications, demonstrating the significant impact that international support levels can have on the balance of power on the ground and Ukraine's capacity to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity amidst Russian aggression.

LETHAL AID DONARS⁷



Shakeup at the Helm: Dismissal of Ukraine's Top Military Commander

In a significant military overhaul nearly two years into the war, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the dismissal of General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Commander in Chief of Ukrainian forces since the start of the war, amidst the tumult of Ukraine's failed counteroffensive. Zelensky replaced him with the former commander of ground forces, General Oleksandr Syrskiy. This decision represents a political gamble by Zelensky, given Zaluzhnyi's standing as one of Ukraine's most revered leaders, even in the face of Ukraine's counteroffensive setbacks. An early February 2024 poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology showed that 94% of Ukrainians trust Zaluzhnyi while only 40% trust Syrskiy. Likely influenced by Ukrainians' familiarity with Zaluzhnyi since the Russian invasion (35% of Ukrainians did not know Syrskiy), these poll results still underline the risk taken by Zelensky with public confidence and morale.⁸ The shakeup occurred as a series of Russian advances across the frontline forced Ukraine into a defensive posture. On February 17, Russia captured Avdiivka, Moscow's most substantial territorial conquest since taking Bakhmut in May 2023. Ukraine's strategic recalibration and leadership change underscore the profound uncertainties as the war progressed into its third year. It also highlights the complex interplay of military strategy, political leadership, and the morale of a nation united in resistance yet facing daunting challenges on and off the battlefield.

Avdiivka's Fall: A Turning Point in the Russo-Ukrainian War?

Russia triumphed in the grueling battle for Avdiivka (OCT 2023 – FEB 2024), a strategically significant town in the Donetsk region. After months of intense fighting, Russia forced the Ukrainian fighters to retreat, leaving behind approximately 200 captured Ukrainian soldiers, according to Russian claims. Control over Avdiivka provides various tactical advantages, including oversight of supply routes and the ability to pressure opposing forces in adjacent areas. The loss of Avdiivka to Russian forces not only represents the worst defeat for the Ukrainian military since the fall of Bakhmut in May 2023 but also boosted Russian morale, reinforcing its will to continue

the offensive. For Ukraine, the withdrawal marks a painful concession, necessitating a reassessment of strategies to reclaim lost territories. The strategic implications of Avdiivka's fall extend beyond the immediate battlefield, influencing the European Union, NATO, and the United States' approach to the conflict. The effects of this event underscore the need for continued support to Ukraine while highlighting the enduring challenges of altering the conflict's trajectory against a backdrop of Russian resilience. Furthermore, the battle's outcome accentuates the geopolitical dynamics of the region, demonstrating the protracted nature of the conflict and its capacity to reshape the security landscape of Eastern Europe, compelling NATO and its allies to reconsider and recalibrate their defensive and support mechanisms in response to the evolving situation.⁹

Resolute Will, Unequal Arsenal: The Contrasting Dynamics of Will and Resources in the Russia-Ukraine War

Russia's incremental territorial gains during the second year of the war emphasize the evolving dynamics of military strength and strategic advantage in the conflict. Despite these advances, Ukraine remains resolute; its determination to defend its territory has not diminished, showcasing a profound nationalistic spirit and commitment to sovereignty. This phase of the war (over 700 days of conflict) vividly demonstrates that Ukraine's psychological edge, derived from an unwavering will to defend its homeland, faces the harsh reality of materiel and personnel constraints. Against Russia's comparatively colossal resources, Ukraine's resolve, though formidable, requires significant Western support to be sustainable. Without continued Western materiel support and strategic assistance, Ukraine's stronger psychological will to fight is at risk of collapsing under Russia's sheer resource advantage. Thus, Western aid remains vital for Ukraine to level the playing field and defend against Russian aggression.



RUSSIA, UKRAINE: YEAR 2 IN REVIEW

FEB 2023



24 POL sends Leopard tanks to UKR; CHN proposes peace plan.

27 RUS forms BN of UKR POWs in breach of Geneva Convention.

MAR

04 UKR begin withdrawal from Bakhmut; UKR requests EU aid for ammo shortages.

19 Putin visits Crimea on 9th anniversary of RUS annexation.

24 IND AF claims RUS war w/ UKR halted major RUS arms delivery.



APR



02 UKR drone attack on St Petersburg kills RUS milblogger and wounds 24.

04 USA grants \$2.6B aid for UKR.

21 NATO announces all members agree to admit UKR after end of war.

MAY



03 UKR drone strikes Kremlin, escalates war into RUS.

09 RUS cancels Victory Day parade in Sevastopol for security concerns.

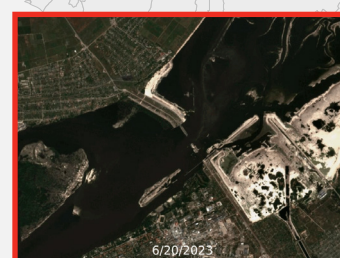
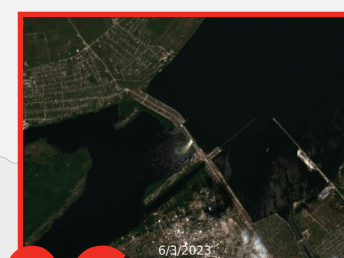
20 RUS captures Bakhmut.

22 RUS reports UKR "sabotage group" infiltrated Belgorod region.

23 Russian Volunteer Corps and Freedom of Russia Legion claim attack on Belgorod.

25 RUS-BLR agree to deployment of tac nuclear weapons in BLR.

JUN



06 Destruction of Kakhovka Dam causes flooding and widespread IDPs in UKR.

10 UKR begins long-anticipated counteroffensive.

Freedom of Russia Legion claims attack on Belgorod.

23 PMC Wagner briefly mutinies against Kremlin (see: RE Update 12).

25 Prigozhin starts BLR "exile" after Wagner mutiny.

JUL



Wagner troops relocate to BLR, begin training BLR Army.

Freedom of Russia Legion claims attack on Belgorod.

16 UKR missile strike on Kerch Bridge restricts RUS log into Crimea.

30 UKR drone attack on Moscow shuts down Vnukovo airport.

AUG

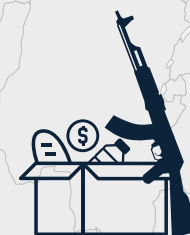
23 Prigozhin killed in suspicious plane crash.



30 DEU supplies UKR with 10x Leopard tanks, weapons.

31 Zelensky starts investigation into draft evasion through med exemptions.

SEP



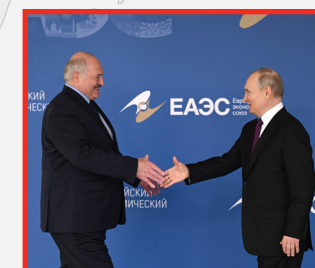
06 USA announces \$1B+ aid pkg for UKR.

18 Zelensky fires sr. def officials over failed counteroffensive.

OCT

RUS deploys tactical nuclear weapons to BLR.

07 Hamas attack on ISR begins major shift of foreign aid from UKR to ISR.



10 UN Human Rights Comm denies RUS membership due to war in UKR.

NOV



11-25 RUS conducts extensive drone attacks on Kyiv and Kherson.

26 UKR drone attacks shutdown 2x RUS airports.

DEC



26 UKR jets destroy RUS landing ship Novocherkassk.

JAN 2024

04 Putin grants RUS citizenship to foreigners who fight for RUS in UKR.

18 UKR drone flies over Putin's home during drone attacks on St Petersburg.

26 UKR & RUS exchange blame for downing of RUS aircraft reportedly transporting UKR POWs.

FEB

07 RUS launches 60+ missiles and drones at 6 UKR regions.

08 Zelenskyy replaces UAF CinC.



17 RUS seizes Avdiivka.

RESEARCH TEAM

Benjamin A. Okonofua, Ph.D.
Research Analyst

Nicole M. Laster-Loucks, Ph.D.
Editor

Rob W. Kurz
Editor

Andrew M. Johnson, LTC (Ret), USA
Research Analyst

Cindy A. Hurst
Editor

Susan L. Littleton
Graphics and Visual Designer

ENDNOTES

- 1 Statista Research Department, "Number of civilian casualties in Ukraine during Russia's invasion verified by OHCHR from February 2022 to February 2024, by month, *Statistica.com*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1318455/ukraine-war-casualties-monthly/>
- 2 Susan Littleton, *Russian and Ukrainian Equipment Losses*, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; equipment losses data gathered from Oryx, "only includes destroyed vehicles and equipment of which photo or videographic evidence is available. Therefore, the amount of equipment destroyed is significantly higher than recorded here." Equipment includes Tanks, AFVs, IFVs, APCs, MRAPs, Infantry Mobility Vehicles, Command Posts and Communications Stations, Engineering Vehicles and Equipment, Self-propelled Anti-Tank Missile Systems, Artillery Support Vehicles and Equipment, Towed Artillery, Self-Propelled Artillery, MLRS, Anti-Aircraft Guns, Self-propelled Anti-Aircraft Guns, SAMS, Radars, Jammers, and Deception Systems. SOURCES: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html>; <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-ukrainian.html>; Aircraft losses data gathered from Oryx, which only "includes destroyed aerial assets of which photo or videographic evidence or pilot death notices are available. Therefore, the amount of destroyed and damaged aircraft is likely significantly higher than recorded here." Aircraft lost include combat aircraft, Strategic Bombers, C2, Transports, Helicopters, UAVs, and Recon UAVs. SOURCE: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/03/list-of-aircraft-losses-during-2022.htm>
- 3 *Domestic Russian Perceptions Polling Update 2023-2024.*, Levada Center. (2024). "Endorsement of President Putin's Activities." <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>; Levada Center. (2024). "Conflict with Ukraine: Estimates for Late 2023 – Early 2024." <https://www.levada.ru/2024/02/06/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-kontsa-2023-nachala-2024-goda/>; and Levada Center. (2024). Conflict with Ukraine: Mass Assessments of February 2024." https://www.levada.ru/2024/03/05/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-massovyie-otsenki-fevralya-2024-goda/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_source_platform=mailpoet&utm_campaign=newsletter-post-title_81
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See *GCKN Running Estimate Update 12: Putin's "Partners": PMC Wagner*, August 8, 2023, <https://community.apan.org/wg/gckn/m/running-estimateproducts/444251>
- 7 Pietro Bompreszi, Ivan Kharitonov, and Christoph Trebesch, "Ukraine Support Tracker," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, February 2024, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>
- 8 Stanislav Pohorilov, "40% of Ukrainians trust new Commander-in-Chief, 90% maintain support for former chief, survey shows," *Ukrainska Pravda*, February 15, 2024, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/02/15/7441990/>
- 9 Kostenko, M., February 24, 2024, Russian forces claim capturing "some 200" Ukrainian troops in Avdiivka. *CNN*. https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-02-24-24/h_ff4a4529b5beb74fcd8c0b3b9d69eac8

Page 8

Susan Littleton, *Russia, Ukraine: Year 2 in Review*, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. *Timeline Images*: Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, On February 24, the anniversary of Ukraine's invincibility, Prime Minister of Ukraine Denys Shmyhal met in Kyiv with Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Poland Mateusz Morawiecki. February 24, 2023; Attribution: *Kmu.gov.ua*, Денис Шмигаль та Матеуш Моравецький зустріли в Україні перші танки Leopard 2, надані Польщею 01.jpg; Ukrainian 25th Sicheslavaska BDE showing their improvised FPV strike drones July 21, 2023, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:UA_FPV_strike_drones_02.jpg; President Putin and Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, Eurasian Economic Forum, 24 May 2023; <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71198/photos/71199>; President Putin, The Presidential Press and Information Office, 23 December 2020, *Kremlin.ru*, CC BY 4.0; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%D0%9F%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD_23.12.20.jpg; A kindergarten in Solomianskyi District of Kyiv, damaged by wreckage of a downed drone during massive Russian attack on the city in the night on 25 November 2023, November 25 2023, CC BY 4.0, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Destructions_in_Kyiv_after_Russian_attack,_2023-11-25_\(02\).webp](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Destructions_in_Kyiv_after_Russian_attack,_2023-11-25_(02).webp); Yevgeny Prigozhin, УлПравда ТВ, June 13, 2023; [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yevgeny_Prigozhin_\(13-06-2023\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yevgeny_Prigozhin_(13-06-2023).jpg); George Chernilevsky, Novochockassk (BDK-46) is a large landing ship of Project 775 (775 / II) of Ropucha class, which is in service with the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Navy. Sevastopol bay; July 26 2012, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BDK_Novochockassk_2012_G2.jpg; Igor Bubín, Kerch Strait Bridge, Sentinel-2 imagery, 2018-APR-14, spatial resolution 10 m, near natural colours, Contains modified Copernicus Sentinel data 2018, CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO, https://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slika:Kerch_Strait_Bridge,_2018-04-14.jpg; The Presidential Office of Ukraine, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy makes a speech in the National Assembly of the Republic of

Korea during the Russo-Ukrainian War, April 11, 2022, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_of_Ukraine_Volodymyr_Zelenskyy_makes_a_speech_in_the_National_Assembly_of_the_Republic_of_Korea.jpg; GIF of destruction of the Kakhovka Dam made with Sentinel-2 imagery, June 20, 2023, (extracted frames from GIF), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kakhovka_dam_destruction1.gif

TRADOC G-2
Global Culture Knowledge Network (GCKN)

Robert W. Kurz, Director

<https://community.apan.org/wg/gckn>
<https://www.pixtoday.net/gckn>
<https://oe.tradoc.army.mil>



Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027



520.674.2765



robert.w.kurz.civ@army.mil