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RUSSIAN TROOP MORALE AHEAD OF THE UKRAINIAN OFFENSIVE

It is fatal to enter any war without the will to win it.
Douglas MacArthur

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INTRODUCTION

The offensive operations carried out by the Russian army in Ukraine have been marked by catastrophic losses of equipment and human resources. In absence of a military-industrial complex capable of replacing losses in the field, the political-military leadership of the Russian Federation adopted a quantitative compensatory strategy, by recruiting military personnel. Following the decree of September 21, 2022, 300,000 Russian citizens were called to arms. Portrayed as an exceptional measure, the process remains open from a legal point of view, in the absence of a decree to cease mobilization. This is in addition to the two annual recruitment figures that take place in the spring and summer, with an annual target of 240,000 recruits. The logistical deficiencies that defined the entire Russian aggression were felt here as well, exacerbated by the losses suffered by the officer corps in the battles of attrition of eastern and southern Ukraine.

The rare traces of dissent in the Russian information sphere refer overwhelmingly to the precarious conditions experienced by ordinary Russians on the front. From the lack of military equipment to shortages of medicine and food, the echoes among the population back home are getting louder. To what extent are the new combatants capable of carrying out the missions, to what extent did the Russian command manage to solve the logistical aspects to ensure the minimum necessary conditions and equipment for the soldiers mobilized last fall, what problems are registered in the process of remunerating those mobilized, what is the state of mind and how well they will be able to withstand the offensive in the summer, what is the Russian ability to regenerate its capabilities, are questions whose answer can give us a better understanding of how the war will develop this year.

Less funds and ammunition for soldiers

Since the last months of 2022, there have been reported cases on Russian social networks where wounded soldiers have not received their payment, or of soldiers have been fighting for months without being (properly) remunerated due to bureaucratic difficulties within the Russian Ministry of Defense.¹ Besides these, the aid for the families of soldiers killed on the frontline has been delayed.² Russian servicemen stationed in Ukraine receive pay in accordance with their military rank and function. For example, a soldier receives a monthly stipend of 195,000 rubles (\$250), a platoon commander 225,000 rubles (\$2,900), and a battalion commander 243,000 rubles (\$3,150).³ Servicemen and volunteers who are fighting in Ukraine and have been injured benefit from financial aid worth 3 million rubles (\$38,970), and in the case of death his family is supposed to receive 5 million rubles (\$65,000).⁴ It is difficult to assess how extensive the phenomenon of delayed payments or monetary compensation for the dead or wounded is, but it is probable that this phenomenon will increase together with the number of losses on the front and a new wave of mobilized soldiers, who will put an even greater pressure on the federal or regional budget, with many of these payments being supported by local authorities. With an year on year drop of 25% in energy revenues and an ever-increasing budget deficit, it is fair to assume that such problems will become chronic.⁵ As such, the material factor driving recruitment among poorer demographics is fundamentally questioned.

Due to the considerable number of human losses, the financial promises of the authorities and the leaders of the mercenary groups became impossible to keep. The leader of the Wagner group promised all the families of the recruited prisoners \$71,000 as compensation for their deaths. With a buoyant death toll, the promise will be hard to keep. Western sources estimate that out of Wagner's 50,000 soldiers, 30,000 were killed in action.⁶ All these reports of delays and problems in paying aid to the families of dead soldiers will surely dent Russian soldiers' determination to fight.



Cemetery of the soldiers of the Wagner group, Tyumen region. Source: RG72, Own Work, CC BY-SA 4.0, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AWagner-tereno_en_la_%C4%88ervi%C5%99Deva_tombejo_05.jpg

¹ "Russia Struggling to Pay Its Troops, Ukraine Says", *Newsweek*, available at:

<https://www.newsweek.com/russia-troops-putin-ukraine-payment-armed-forces-morale-1753033>.

² "Politics without Images", *Vkontakte*, available at: https://vk.com/dobrye_rusichi?w=wall-70903901_101811.

³ "The salary of Russian servicemen serving in Ukraine under contract", available at: https://xn--90aivcdt6dxbc.xn--p1ai/articles/military_service/sluzhba_po_kontraktu/kakoe_denezhnoe_dovolstvie_poluchayut_voennosluzhashchie_po_kontraktu_prokhodyashchie_sluzhbu_v_zone/

⁴ "Families of soldiers and law enforcement officers killed in the war in Ukraine will receive 5 million rubles each", *zaks.ru*, available at: <https://www.zaks.ru/new/archive/view/234738>.

⁵ "The Ministry of Finance estimates that the budget deficit in February is half of that in January", *Forbes.ru*, available at: <https://www.forbes.ru/finansy/485761-deficit-budzeta-rossii-v-anvare-fevrale-sostavil-2-6-trln-rublej>

⁶ "No Body, No Payment!: Wagner Mercenary Deaths Being Hidden From Families Back In Russia", *Radio Free Europe Russia*, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-wagner-mercenary-deaths-hidden-compensation-ukraine/32313434.html>

Problems regarding the payment of soldiers have also emerged in the separatist republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, as well as in the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions. Russia was to include all military units from these annexed territories into the Russian Armed Forces, but according to some Russian experts, the Kremlin is not rushing this process to avoid giving a salary level similar to that of the Russian army.⁷

Aspects referring to the quality of infantry weapons distributed to the new Russian fighters are not encouraging for their morale either, with many posts and short video messages showing inadequate combat equipment, from old uniforms to rusty Kalashnikovs.⁸ The shortage of conventional weaponry is anything but encouraging for the morale of the recruits, who are sent to fight in assault units practically empty-handed - the equivalent of a death sentence. In addition, information about modern weaponry received by Ukraine from the West further affects confidence in its own forces. Video messages of Russian soldiers complaining about the lack of basic equipment and orders from superiors for what are considered to be suicidal missions frequently appear on Russian social networks.⁹

The poor preparation of the Russian offensive operations is the subject of other public reports. For example, in early March 2023, soldiers from units fighting on the Avdiivka front referred to the fact that attacks are coordinated without prior reconnaissance operations.¹⁰

The lack of a sufficient amount of ammunition also affects the efficiency of military operations carried out by Russian troops.¹¹ In the first months of the war, the Russian army used about 60-70 thousand artillery shells a day, a number that began to decrease from November last year, reaching that now it

⁷ "Recruits are increasingly complaining about transfers to assault units within the separatist Donetsk region's army. Why are they transferred and what happens to them there?", *Battles-singers-127711.appspot*, available at: <https://battles-singers-127711.appspot.com/articles/2023/03/09/mobilizovannye-vse-chashe-zhaluyutsya-na-perebroski-v-shturmovye-otryady-dnr-zachem-ih-tuda-perevodyat-i-chto-s-nimi-proishodit>

⁸ "Russian Soldiers Assaulted with Rusty, Moldy Assault Rifles," *Livejournal*, available at: <https://litray.livejournal.com/414372.html>

⁹ Peter Dickinson, "Russia's new offensive will test the morale of Putin's mobilized masses", *Atlantic Council*, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-new-offensive-will-test-the-morale-of-putins-mobilized-masses/>

¹⁰ "'Dear Vladimir Putin': Russian troops call for help from the Ukrainian front", *Le Monde*, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/russia/article/2023/03/14/dear-vladimir-putin-russian-troops-call-for-help-from-the-ukrainian-front_6019342_140.html

¹¹ "Latest Defense Intelligence Update on the situation in Ukraine - 14 March 2023", *Twitter.com*, available at: <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1635535592518828033?s=20>

uses about 15,000 artillery shots per day.¹² Ammunition shortages produced significant tensions between the Wagner mercenaries and the Russian military leadership. The leader of the Wagner group, Evgeny Prigozhin, accused the army command of not sending him the necessary amount of ammunition, given that they are making the main effort on the most important front, that of Bakhmut. He later added that not only Wagner, but also the Russian troops were suffering from the lack of ammunition.¹³ The crisis situation can be caused not only by the lack of an adequate amount of ammunition, but also by the power struggle between the various rival groups, between Prigozhin and the Minister of Defense Shoigu for example, the Wagner units being intentionally weakened in order to suffer greater losses and thus to diminish the influence of their leader.¹⁴

Prigozhin's accusations of questionable decisions, incompetence or even bad faith on the part of the Ministry of Defence towards the Wagner Group¹⁵ had a strong impact on the general public in Russia. The hashtag #ДайСнарядыВагнерам (give ammunition to Wagner fighters) has become extremely popular on the most frequently used social networks in Russia, such as Telegram, V Kontakte and Tiktok. These internal conflicts also lower the morale of Russian troops, creating the impression of instability and lack of coordination. Faced with the failures of regular troops, part of the population becomes convinced that Prigozhin and his mercenaries are the only military unit that brings tangible results on the battlefield. This perception contributes to a diminishing trust in the Russian state and its institutions and the emergence of genuine feudal rulers with armies of their own who can later claim more political power and influence in the Russian state, especially in the event of social unrest and the atomisation of central power in the Russian Federation.¹⁶ In addition to the Wagner forces, there are an estimated 52 volunteer battalions on the front from various regions of Russia, financed by local leaders, most notoriously by the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.¹⁷

Bakhmut does not believe in tears

The intense fighting at Bakhmut turned the city into a modern-day Verdun, with considerable losses on both sides and a huge consumption of ammunition and military equipment. Bakhmut has no crucial military importance for the further conduct of hostilities, becoming a political stake for both sides. It is the symbol of Ukrainian resistance and the determination of an entire nation to fight the Russian occupier, and on the other hand it is the epicenter of the rift between Russia and the West, denoting Moscow's determination to continue the fight to capture the whole of Donbas. At the same time, Bakhmut also turned into a personal stake for the leader of the Wagner group, to demonstrate his capabilities and essential role in this conflict.¹⁸

¹² "The Russian military will suffer an extremely large howitzer shortfall this summer.", *Currenttime.tv*, available at: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/shell-hunger-russian-army/32306804.html>

¹³ "Wagner Chief Says All Russian Troops In Ukraine Need More Ammunition", *Radio Free Europe*, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-wagner-prigozhin-ammunition/32312383.html>

¹⁴ "Assessment of the Russian Offensive Campaign March 12, 2023," *Understandingwar.org*, available at: <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-12-2023>

¹⁵ "Mercenary chief vented to Putin over Ukraine war bungling", *Washington Post*, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/10/25/putin-insider-prigozhin-blasts-russian-generals-ukraine/>

¹⁶ "Meduza takes an in-depth look at PMC Wagner's tactics," *Meduza*, available at:

<https://meduza.io/feature/2023/03/16/meduza-podrobno-razbiraet-taktiku-chvk-vagnera>

¹⁷ "Dozens of armed groups - Wagner mercenaries, Kadyrov, neo-Nazis, accept anyone as "cannon fodder" for the war in Ukraine, including prisoners and sick people.", *Novayagazeta.eu*, available at: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/08/10/pekhota-pushche-nevoli>

¹⁸ "Fight for Bakhmut Becomes Moment of Truth for Wagner Founder". *Wall Street Journal*, available at:

The mentality of the Russian command corps in dealing with the issue of casualties in its own units with a nonchalance bordering cynicism has remained unchanged since Tsarist and Soviet times. On the frontlines, soldiers who had just completed their training or had been trained for specializations other than infantry found themselves on the front line being sent to assault units to carry out impossible missions. They draw attention to the Stalinist model of conducting war, being sent out in successive waves and sacrificed in order to identify enemy firing points and occupy Ukrainian positions with overwhelming numbers of soldiers. An example of this is that of soldiers from the Kaliningrad region, who complain that they have ended up on the frontline despite having been conscripted to serve in Russia's territorial defense. According to reports, because of the conditions under which attacks are carried out and the way they are treated by commanders, some soldiers prefer prison for desertion or disobeying orders, and there have even been cases of suicide. Recruits are told when they arrive at the front that they must forget what they were promised at the recruitment centers, the only thing that matters now being that they carry out their orders. A Russian blogger's account of the attitude of commanders is very suggestive: "if you are ordered to die, then you must die!".¹⁹ Posts by mobilised soldiers from regions such as Murmansk, Voronezh, Tuva, Tatarstan, Irkutsk, Belgorod, Omsk evoke similar problems.²⁰



Soldiers from the 504th Tank Regiment in Omsk complaining that they were sent to fight in Ukraine without the necessary training.

Source: [Vkontakte](#)

The use of newly mobilized troops as stormtroopers is having a negative impact even among those who do not have a negative attitude to the war, with protests from the mothers and wives of some soldiers, who are not opposed to the war itself, but do not accept that their sons and wives should be sent into combat on missions for which they have not been trained and without proper equipment.²¹ Other protests by Russian women include sending recruits directly to the front, even though they were initially told

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/fight-for-bakhmut-becomes-moment-of-truth-for-wagner-founder-6146583f>

¹⁹ "The Russians refuse to fight. Acute conflict between conscripts and soldiers of the separatist army in Donetsk", *Youtube.com*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTU49mSOjog>

²⁰ Such posts are published on Telegram and Vkontankte. For example: <https://t.me/mobilizationnews> is a channel on the social network Telegram, which reports news about the mobilization in Russia and appeals to soldiers and their families.

²¹ "Russian wives and mothers call on Putin to stop sending mobilized men 'to the slaughter'", *CNN*, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/12/europe/russia-mobilization-putin-protest-wives-mothers-intl-hnk/index.html>

they would not be sent to the conflict zone.²² The rising death toll will contribute to growing discontent among the civilian population, further damaging the morale of those to be sent to the front as "cannon fodder".



Women's protests over the use of conscripts at the front.

Source: Wikipedia.ru

Another problem is represented by the shortage of human resources originating in Donbass, which were previously overused in fighting. Compensating for these losses are recruits from the autumn partial mobilization campaign, who are sent to fight without equipment and often without the necessary weapons.²³ Since the beginning of the war, the role of "cannon fodder" has been for enlisted soldiers from the separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, but now these losses are being compensated for by transferring mobilized soldiers to Russia.²⁴ Even Wagner's second recruitment drive in Russia's prisons in the winter was not as successful.²⁵ At this point, the spring recruitment of young men to serve on a conscription basis in the Russian army began. A bill has been introduced in the State Duma to raise the conscription age from 18 to 21 and the upper limit from 27 to 30. It is intended to be a gradual process, stretching over three years, with the aim of getting more Russians under arms.²⁶ On the other hand, there are growing reports that military commissariats are sending out letters to more than 40 regions of Russia to clarify the military situation,²⁷ with the suspicion that a

²² "Russia's war continues," *Twitter.com*, available at:

<https://twitter.com/kardinal691/status/1635591358579613697?s=46&t=vxbf6gW3ySpumIB3tUIMzQ>

²³ "Recruits are increasingly complaining about transfers to assault units within the army of the separatist republic of Donetsk. Why are they being transferred there and what happens to them?," *Battles-singers-127711.appspot.com*, available at:

<https://battles-singers-127711.appspot.com/articles/2023/03/09/mobilizovannye-vse-chashe-zhaluyutsya-na-perebroski-v-shturmovye-otryady-dnr-zachem-ih-tuda-perevodyat-i-chto-s-nimi-proishodit>

²⁴ "The Kremlin's cannon fodder: how residents of the breakaway Donetsk and Lugansk regions are being forced into war with Ukraine," *Moscow Times*, available at:

<https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/06/30/pushechnoe-myaso-dlya-kremlya-kak-zhitelei-ldnr-sgonyayut-na-front-a21811>

²⁵ "A second round. Wagner's recruiters are once again touring the colonies from which they have taken prisoners before - but now the prisoners don't quite trust them," *Zona.media*, available at:

<https://zona.media/article/2023/02/06/verbovka>

²⁶ "A draft law on raising the recruitment age has been submitted to the State Duma. Upper age to be raised to 30 from 2024.", *BBC*, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-64937792>

²⁷ "Residents of several regions of Russia have begun to receive addresses from military commissariats for 'clarification of the military situation,'" *Meduza*, available at:

<https://meduza.io/feature/2023/03/16/zhitelyam-rossijskih-regionov-nachali-prisylat-povestki-v-voenkomat-dlya-utochneniya-dannyh-vse-vtoraya-volna-mobilizatsii-po-tihomu-nachalas-i-mozhno-li-prosto-proignirovat-povestku>

second wave of mobilization is being prepared to bring in some 400,000 new people under arms.²⁸ According to Penza region military commissioner Andrey Surkov, students in their final year at Penza University will receive their graduation diploma along with their conscription order.²⁹

The war begins to have an impact on families in the more remote regions of Siberia, where the recruitment rate is much higher than in the urban centers of the western Russian Federation. Buryatia, for example, a region on the border with Mongolia, records a considerable number of deaths as a result of the war. Being a poor region, the loss of the father, who in many cases is the family's only source of income, generates major problems, especially for families with several children. Moreover, the decrease of the male population in regions with harsher living conditions generates a depopulation with a long-term effect.³⁰ The Ministry of Defense in Moscow specified when questioned by a deputy that the provision according to which people with several children are exempted from incorporation has the character of a "recommendation".³¹

It is 8 times more likely for a Buryat and 10 times more likely for an ethnic Tuvan to die on the front in Ukraine than for an ethnic Russian.³² Given that the population in these Siberian areas is small (900,000 in Buryatia and 330,000 in Tuva respectively) and that ethnic groups are minorities even in their own republics, there is a very real risk that the very existence of these communities could be threatened. Because of these discriminatory recruitments, the support of the population of Siberia for the mobilization and for the war itself is in a precipitous decline, reflected by the general sentiments portrayed in social media posts.³³ Sensing the rise of social tensions in the area, Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to Buryatia on March 13, 2023, the first after a 6-year hiatus. According to the president of the Free Buryatia Foundation, Alexandra Garmazhapova, this visit confirms that the morale of the locals is low, due to the large number of burials of ethnic Buryat soldiers, which take place almost daily. The population is aware of the discrepancy between the number of soldiers sent from the region compared to other more developed regions such as Moscow.³⁴

There is also a special category on the front, consisting of soldiers dissatisfied with the conditions in which they have to fight, but who have strong militaristic feelings, the so-called turbo-patriots, who find in the head of Wagner, Evgeniy Prigozhin, a true opinion leader.³⁵ This group, which has a critical position towards the current course of the war, reflected in social media by several military commentators, is in favor of a hard line on the part of the Russian political-military leadership and may

²⁸ "Russia will recruit 400,000 soldiers starting in April", *Pnz.ru*, available at: <https://pnz.ru/life/v-rossii-s-aprelya-nachnetsya-nabor-400-000-voennyh/>

²⁹ "Students of Penza State University will receive with their graduation diplomas and incorporation orders", *Kommersant.ru*, available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5876137>

³⁰ "Gruz 200: What is known about Russian losses in Ukraine until early September", *BBC*, available at: <https://bbc.global.ssl.fastly.net/russian/features-62767359>

³¹ "The Russian General Staff stated that the provision on the exemption of incorporation for people with many children has a 'recommendation' character", *Meduza.io*, available at: <https://meduza.io/news/2023/03/13/genshtab-zayavil-chto-ukazaniya-ob-otsrochke-ot-mobilizatsii-dlya-mnogodetnyh-otsov-nosyat-rekomendatelnyy-harakter>

³² "How Russians, Indigenous Peoples and Belarusians Unite to Oppose the War in Ukraine," *Resilience.org*, available at: <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2023-02-28/how-russians-indigenous-people-and-belarusians-are-uniting-to-resist-the-war-in-ukraine/>

³³ "AI Can Tell Us How Russians Feel About the War. Putin Won't Like the Results.", *Politico*, available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/02/25/ai-russians-feel-war-putin-ukraine-00084145>

³⁴ "There are funerals almost every day". The head of the "Free Buryatia" Foundation about life in the region", *Youtube.com*, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYowK_4xDTo

³⁵ "Patriots walk into the sand. The war gave rise to a non-systemic opposition, which the Kremlin is still not suppressing", *Verstka.media*. available at: <https://verstka.media/turbopatrioty-novaya-nesistemnaya-oppoziciya>

be the hard core of a radical action of takeover by a "war party", that is ultra-nationalist and not at all willing to compromise and negotiate with Ukraine and the West.

Especially when it comes to the use of conscripts as stormtroopers, this has had a considerable impact on the Russian civilian population. Being aware of the impact on the morale of the military, but also of the population at home, the Russian authorities try to censor negative information from the front. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the Roskomnadzor state agency has allegedly censored 11,800 online materials that put the Russian army in a bad light in any form, from reports on the quality of the equipment used to those about attacking civilians.³⁶ Censorship leaves many Russians, especially older ones who do not use social media, with a positive impression of the conduct of the war and the mood on the front, when in reality the situation is much more volatile.

CONCLUSION

Taking into account the number of those mobilized in the first wave, the number of training facilities in Russia and Belarus, the two waves of conscription-based recruitment which at the end of a year of training can increase the number of contract soldiers, it can be estimated that Russia has the capacity to generate a human resource of at least 400,000 people every year for its armed forces. However, their ability to train and fight, and especially their morale, remains problematic. The financial motivation will diminish as it becomes apparent that Russia no longer has the funds necessary for salaries and monetary compensation for the injured or the families of the deceased. The average command corps was affected by the losses of the first year of the war, making it impossible to train in a short time a sufficient number of captains, majors and lieutenant-colonels with the necessary experience. As in World War II, a number of young officers with combat experience would emerge, but not enough to make up for the losses.

The Ukrainian army is preparing the next offensive, through which it will try to continue the liberation of the occupied territory and, most likely, to cut the land bridge between Donbass and Crimea through an offensive action from north to south, in the direction of Zaporozhye - Melitopol. Russia has done extensive engineering work to protect Crimea, which will make the Ukrainian advance difficult. However, there remains an unknown variable, difficult to quantify: the combative spirit of the Russians. How much will the soldiers trained in the last mobilization campaign want to fight? Leopard tanks are not enough to create a major change on the battlefield, but the morale of the Russians can collapse so that entire segments of the front collapse. If in Stalin's time there were political commissars and NKVD troops who executed those who wanted to withdraw, now it will be more difficult to resort to such methods on a generalized scale. Russian officers' lack of respect for the lives of their own soldiers, which is rooted in a historical military culture that disregards the value of human resources, will lead to the continued use of conscripts as cannon fodder in missions intended for experienced soldiers, which will increase the rift between command corps and soldiers. To all this will be added the tensions and the lack of homogeneity between the Russian troops and the mercenaries of the Wagner group, better equipped with individual weaponry and better paid than the forces of the Ministry of Defense.

³⁶ "Inside the Obscure Russian Agency That Censors the Internet: An RFE/RL Investigation." *Radio Free Europe Russia*, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-agency-internet-censorship/32262102.html>

It remains to be seen whether the Ukrainian offensive will be able to produce a surprise, with an impact on the conduct of the war, or if we will witness a war of attrition, constantly grinding the resources of both belligerents. Such an assumption will benefit the Russian side, taking into account the demographic difference. But the greater number of soldiers alone will not be a determining factor, especially if these soldiers no longer have any motivation to fight, and the news from home, regarding how their loved ones are coping with the economic problems, will be increasingly worse. As in World War I, Russia has the ability to mobilize large numbers of people, but lacks the ability to train, feed and equip them to normal standards. The last offensive of the tsarist army, the Brusilov Offensive, ended with heavy losses of men and equipment for the Russian army, and a few months later, in February 1917, the revolution caused Nicholas II to abdicate, as his autocratic regime crumbled. Such changes in the attitude of the Russian military, from loyalty to the regime to refusal to fight any more, are achieved over time, in a combination of accumulating frustrations with the fighting conditions and limited achievements on the front, and dissatisfaction with the poor standard of living of those at home. The aberrant orders and impossible missions are accentuated by the generals' lack of will to deliver bad news to Putin, seeking strategically insignificant successes, as is now being attempted at Bakhmut, regardless of the human cost. The pressure on poorly equipped and trained soldiers will thus increase, generated in effect by the supreme commander himself. Vladimir Putin is not only gambling his political career through the war in Ukraine, but his own life. It is much less likely to have a negotiated retirement, as Boris Yeltsin did with him, or to secure an honorable retirement, following a velvet coup, as happened to Nikita Khrushchev when he was ousted from power by Leonid Brezhnev. Unscrupulous people like Prigozhin, Kadirov or General Surovikin seem more like the portrayal of executioners from the Stalinist period, like Ezhov or Beria, who will not grant him clemency in case of defeat. As such, the only way forward seems to be this spiral of violence, consisting of this madness of sending new contingents to the front, with increasingly weak morale, increasingly poorly trained and equipped, the result on the front being predictable. If Ukraine will be helped by the West to resist, even in a war that will last for another two or three years, the chances of a collapse of the Putin regime are increasing.



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