

What is Russia's real strength in the war? Has power been overestimated?

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Russian President Vladimir Putin was counting on a quick victory after the invasion of Ukraine, but that proved to be an illusion. The call-up of reservists and the recent recovery of territories by Ukraine, such as the city of Kherson, demonstrate Russian difficulties. For Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, “it’s the beginning of the end of the war”.

After all, was the power of the Russian army overestimated? How strong are Russian troops, in fact?

Russia claimed military status. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia did everything it could to maintain its superpower status—also as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. When it became clear that the country’s economy would not guarantee this position of prominence in the world, the way out was to claim this status in military terms.

Russia’s military has for decades been considered one of the largest and most powerful in the world — even equipped with nuclear weapons.

And, lest the world forget it, Putin regularly provided footage of choreographed military parades in Moscow or performed military exercises with friendly countries such as Belarus.

However, the real power of an army is not measured in choreographed steps in Red Square, but in the trenches of a battlefield. And Russian troops are being cornered in Ukraine by a much smaller army that didn’t even exist a few years ago. How could this happen?

The real size of Putin’s army

On paper, the Russian Armed Forces have 1 million troops and should soon have 1.1 million, says defense expert Margarete Klein of the German Institute for International Relations and Security. The actual size, however, is much smaller.

And a large part of these units has already been used in Ukraine. “They suffered huge losses in terms of soldiers,” says Klein. There are no exact figures, but US intelligence services estimate that Russia has already suffered tens of thousands of deaths or injuries.

A good part of these casualties would have been registered in regiments that were stationed — in times of peace — in the Asian part of Russia, says the American specialist George Barros.

According to him, the idea that Russia has a large number of reservists ready to go into action does not correspond to reality. The course of the war so far is proving that the world has long overestimated the strength of the Russian army, he reckons.

The reservists called up since September are to fill the gaps left by casualties. By calling up these reservists, Putin is just trying to maintain the current line of the front after so many retreats, experts say.

No training or combat equipment

The profile of those called up gives a good idea of the current state of the Russian military force. “There are men over 50 years old with health problems”, says Barros. Several publications on social media corroborate this observation.

Before going to war, reservists need to be trained and equipped. However, in the current situation, many will only receive one or two months of training, which is far from enough.

And there are those who are sent into combat without any training or equipment, says Barros. He considers it difficult that military victories can be achieved with such reservists – the practical effect should be an increase in the number of dead and wounded.

Russian security expert Pavel Luzin, who lives in the US, is of the same opinion and reckons Ukraine will continue to struggle.

The country has had achievements. Kherson, for example, in southern Ukraine, was under Russian rule since the beginning of the conflict and was illegally annexed by Moscow in October, but was reconquered by Kiev’s army last week. The reconquest of this important city on the banks of the Dnieper River is one of Ukraine’s greatest victories in the war against Moscow.

Luzin adds that Russia’s weapons industry is not in a position to provide a significant amount of equipment in the short term, especially for reservists who are being called up.

Klein recalls that old weapons that were stored since the Soviet era are being used. She points out that it’s not even certain whether much of this material still works or whether it wasn’t long ago sold through corruption. The Russian defense industry lacks chips for high-precision weapons, she says.

Russia’s real big military advantage over Ukraine is that it has a much larger population, so it can send more and more reservists to war in the long run, notes expert Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute in Washington.

Just sending more soldiers won’t do it.

There are several components that determine success in a war, comments Barros. Soldiers, modern weapons, good training, leadership, motivation and logistics are just some of them.

“Simply sending more people to the front will not solve the problem the Russians are facing,” Barros stresses, adding that Ukrainian forces continue to advance. The Ukrainian counter-offensive is not over, she asserts, and the Russians can be satisfied if they can hold their current positions.

The Armed Forces of Russia have always been clearly superior to those of Ukraine, both in terms of the quality of weapons and the number of soldiers. But Moscow's military leadership has so far not known how to use this tactical superiority to achieve its strategic objectives in Ukraine, analyzes Barros.

Not even the use of well-trained and equipped mercenaries (paid soldiers), such as those of the Wagner paramilitary group, was enough. This group had between 8,000 and 9,000 fighters at its disposal before the war started. The expert believes that the employment of these men will not have a significant impact on the course of the war.

Nuclear weapons to intimidate the West

It is not surprising that Russia resorts to nuclear weapons to try to intimidate Western countries. "This threat is not new," Klein recalls. The aim is to undermine Western support for Ukraine. But militarily, nuclear weapons are of little use. The use of them has a mainly political bias, assesses Klein.

She considers it unlikely that nuclear weapons will ever be used, as, as a result, Putin would lose even the support of China or India. Carpenter, however, says that if Putin has to choose between using nuclear weapons or answering for his crimes in an international court, he will choose the nuclear option.

"Russian forces need a break as they are exhausted," says Barros. He estimates that the Ukrainian Army will carry out more counteroffensives this European winter.

Carpenter says Russia, deep down, wants a quick end to the war, and that Ukraine and the West should be willing to negotiate. Klein, Barros and Luzin, on the other hand, estimate that the war will only end when Putin suffers a total defeat or when the West withdraws its support for Ukraine.