

The plateauing of Russia's military strategy in Ukraine

Russia's battlefield strategy in Ukraine has plateaued and, if nothing radically changes, Russia cannot expect any significant progress on the battlefield in 2026.



► Mykola Bielieskov

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Another bloody campaign is expected in the ongoing Ukraine–Russia conflict. However, the efficiency of Russia's current battlefield military strategy seems to have plateaued. If nothing changes radically in Russia's approach to force constitution and application, the Kremlin cannot expect progress on the battlefield in 2026 to radically strengthen its negotiation position. It is critical to highlight this, given the ongoing contest for perception among wider audiences.

As 2026 unfolds, the Ukraine–Russia war still revolves around Russian attempts to fully capture the Donetsk region, anchor its front around the Oskil River and advance as far as possible into the Zaporizhia region. While Russia has held the battlefield initiative since mid-autumn 2023, it has proved unable to

orchestrate a rapid breakthrough. In 2025, Russia tried to build a picture of omnipotence through attempts to advance on all fronts to strengthen its negotiation position. As a result, while Russia occupied almost 5000 km², it barely managed to push Ukraine out of Pokrovsk-Myrnohrad, and while it exploited Ukrainian shortcomings around Hulyaipole and Syversk to score some local successes, it could not break Ukraine's will to fight.

Russia's current military strategy: development and components

Russia's current military battlefield strategy against the Ukraine Defence Forces was devised and tested in the second part of 2023–2025. Russia has a strong manpower advantage. Since the end of 2023, Ukraine has been struggling to relaunch its mobilisation process within the social and institutional constraints in which it operates. Russia has managed to find a socially acceptable and financially sustainable model of manpower replenishment through voluntary recruitment based on competitive financial inducements, and to dispense with mobilisation and associated risks. This has made it possible to steadily increase the size of Russian forces despite staggering losses. Russian forces numbered [420,000 troops](#) in September 2023, [510,000 troops](#) in May 2024 and [710,000 troops](#) in December 2025. Russia's relative advantage in manpower has made it possible to create openings for advances along the front, pinning down Ukrainian troops while creating a preponderance of forces in some priority areas.

Russia's manpower advantage has formed the basis for infiltration tactics based on highly dispersed small groups of 2–3 personnel. These tactics are a response to the Ukrainian "drone wall" initiative adopted to counter mechanised attacks. The idea behind infiltration tactics is very simple. Even though Ukrainian units carry out 7000–9000 tactical UAV strikes every day, it is difficult to find and target every group of 2–3 soldiers that attempts to bypass thinly manned Ukrainian forward positions. Some groups manage to slowly accumulate behind these positions, endangering them and forcing eventual withdrawal.

Russia has improved its reconnaissance and firepower. The introduction and mass use of glide bombs since early 2024 has allowed Russia to reintroduce piloted battlefield aviation. In 2024, 40,000 glide bombs were released by Russian combat planes. Russia used approximately 60,000 glide bombs in 2025. Ukraine has not managed to fully nullify this Russian advantage.

Russia has also successfully adopted tactical UAVs based on radio-guided first-person view (FPV) and mass use of fibre optic-guided FPV drones resistant to electronic warfare (EW). At the same time, cheap and ubiquitous loitering strike UAVs of the Molniya type have been introduced capable of carrying up to 10 kg distances of up to 40 km. These have generated a lot of problems. Moreover, in 2024, Russia saturated the Ukrainian rear with relatively cheap Supercam or ZALA ISR UAVs combined with Iskander short-range ballistic missiles, successfully targeting Patriot SAMs, M142 HIMARS, helicopters and combat

aircraft.

Russia has learned from Ukraine the added value of separate UAV units specifically trained and equipped for and tasked with battlefield interdiction. The now infamous Rubicon units are attached to each Russian combined arms army. In 2025, Russia introduced a separate branch of its armed forces – Unmanned System Troops – which unites all the units and formations for battlefield interdiction and enemy UAV operator destruction.

Russian UAV operators have prioritised battlefield interdiction and the destruction of Ukrainian UAV operators, targeting rotations, logistics and the medical evacuation of Ukraine's Defence Forces. This systemic approach was employed with deadly effect for the first time in the latter stages of the Kursk operation. Constantly attacking rotation, logistics and evacuation disrupt the link between rear and forward troops, with negative consequences for defence. Battlefield interdiction combined with infiltration tactics create major dilemmas for frontline commanders, eventually squeezing out forward Ukrainian troops due to the threat of encirclement and undermining rear support. Separately, specialised Russian UAV operators aided by glide bombs have prioritised finding, fixing and destroying Ukrainian UAV operators. Russia understands that diverse UAVs form the backbone of Ukrainian defences. Even when operators survive being targeted, it takes time to reconstitute combat capabilities given the destruction of support equipment.

A combination of these five factors explains Russia's constant pressure along the frontline and its steady advances in 2024–25. In 2024, Russia occupied approximately 3600 km² of Ukraine's sovereign territory; in 2025 it occupied almost 5000 square km. These incremental advances build constant pressure and attrition, generates a picture for the ongoing contest for external consumption and influences international perceptions of war dynamics.

Ukrainian countermeasures and adjustment

The Russian cycle of tactical and technological adaptation over the past 2.5 years has forced Ukraine to adopt a broad set of countermeasures and adjustments.

In response to Russia's heavy reliance on its manpower advantage, the Ukraine Defence Forces have prioritised the detection and destruction of Russian manpower. This goal was explicitly supported by Robert "Magyar" Brovdy when he was appointed commander of Unmanned Systems Command in June 2025 to counter Russia's infiltration tactics. This prioritisation at the expense of other targets was contested within the Ukraine Defence Forces, but it has delivered the expected results. Since the summer of 2025, Russian force strength has stagnated at 710,000 to 720,000 troops; the number killed or wounded has been equivalent to monthly recruitment of 30–33,000 troops. The new head of the

Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (MoD), Mykhailo Fedorov, has said that the Ukraine Defence Forces should aim to kill or wound 50,000 Russian troops a month to fully stabilise the front. This level of losses undermines the ability to improve professionalism among frontline formations through better sharing of combat skills among the recently recruited.

Ukraine has also employed counter infiltration measures. Infiltration through dispersed small infantry units in response to the efficiency of the “drone wall” has its downsides. Most of the troops involved in infiltration are of low quality in close combat. If positions gained through infiltration are not solidified, which is difficult under conditions of constant surveillance and strikes, such troops can be dislodged by elite formations provided that the proper conditions are created using UAVs. Such tactics were devised within the [2nd Corps of the National Guard](#) and have been successfully tested at Kupyansk, Pokrovsk-Myrnohrad and in the Dnipropetrovsk region in the past six months.

The Ukraine Defence Forces have successfully pioneered UAVs as effective air defence. Initially, this was mostly to counter Russian battlefield reconnaissance (Supercam, ZALA, Orlan-10) and kamikaze (Lancet) UAVs to disrupt Russian kill chains. It was then broadened to target Molniya loitering UAVs along with strategic one-way strike (Shahed-136/Geran-2) and decoy (Gerbera) UAVs, which enter Ukrainian airspace through the active frontline. In March 2026, the Ukraine Defence Forces intercepted a staggering [33,000 Russian UAVs](#). In addition, the Ukraine Defence Forces have made major progress in the [middle strike campaign](#) (a range 20–300 km from ground zero) to target Russian air defence complexes, EW, warehouses and command control nodes. An improved Ukrainian middle strike campaign imposes additional costs on Russian forces as they attempt to advance.

Unmanned Ground Vehicles (UGVs) have mitigated the manpower deficit. UGVs have proved to be a good response to Russian attempts to disrupt Ukrainian rotations, logistics and medical evacuation through the targeting and destruction of manned vehicles close to the frontline. In just three months of 2026, [UGVs performed 24,500 combat tasks](#). According to the Ukrainian MoD, 167 units use UGVs for various support missions – half a year before the figure was 67 units. UGVs are an effective complement to the heavy UAVs that have been used for logistics functions since 2024.

Given the acute manpower deficit, some [western observers](#) privately or even publicly anticipated a Ukrainian frontline collapse in 2025. Such predictions were based on a template for previous wars, which calculates the density of forward troops in proportion to front length. However, the proliferation of UAVs for instant surveillance and strike has meant that Ukraine has managed to keep fighting, despite its thinly manned forward positions of fewer than 10 people per kilometre in places. So, once again, Ukraine has defied the direst predictions of gloom and doom.

Largely, Ukraine has managed to mitigate its own problems and Russia's advantages. However, this should not be taken for granted as both sides compete for fleeting tactical and technological advantage. Furthermore, further progress with Ukrainian unmanned platforms should not deflect from the manpower-intensive character of the ongoing war. The role of human beings has changed from direct combat to planning, supporting, using and maintaining diverse unmanned platforms. The manpower deficit still plagues Ukraine's war effort, imposing severe limits in terms of the simultaneous employment of diverse effects and forcing strict prioritisation. This problem is combined with ongoing attempts to improve command and control through corps reform. The corps system has reached the initial operational capability stage but full operational capability status is still months and much effort away.

Implications of the plateau in the efficiency of Russia's military strategy

Despite the constant promises to the Kremlin by Russian generals of an eventual breakthrough from constant pressure along the thinly manned Ukrainian frontline, Russia's grouping of forces is still as far from this goal as it was in 2024 or 2025. Russian forces can probably maintain steady advances at the tempo seen in the past two years while paying a steep price. The efficiency of the current Russian military strategy, devised in the second half of 2023, has plateaued, given Russian limitations and Ukrainian countermeasures and adaptations centred on diverse unmanned platforms.

Thus, the Russian military will not be able to radically strengthen Russia's negotiating position through major battlefield successes. Without innovations in Russian force composition, technology or tactics, in combination and at scale, the Kremlin will probably seek to strengthen its negotiation position through attacks on Ukrainian critical infrastructure to degrade it beyond any chance of quick repair.

The upcoming shortage of missile defence interceptors, given their consumption in the ongoing Middle East war, is a [major concern for the Ukrainian leadership](#) – with no solution in sight. The situation has forced Ukraine to adopt a ratio of ["one missile to one interceptor"](#). Thus, Ukraine's missile defence will be a major concern for its international partners in the near future.

Mykola Bielieskov is research fellow at the National Institute for Strategic Studies and a senior analyst at Ukrainian NGO "Come Back Alive"