

An aerial photograph of a rural landscape, likely in Eastern Europe, showing a patchwork of agricultural fields in various shades of brown and tan. A river or canal winds through the fields. In the bottom right corner, a satellite is visible, partially obscuring the landscape. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

After the Kursk Incursion: A Turning Point for Russian Mobilisation?

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Executive Summary

Although it is premature to draw conclusions about the military results of Ukraine's incursion into the Kursk region, it has demonstrated at least one indisputable fact. The fact that the Kremlin has allowed Ukraine to fight for more than a month on internationally recognised Russian territory, resigning itself to political damage, demonstrates that Moscow has no strategic military reserves. This would appear to speak, first and foremost, of the massive human losses on the Russian side since the start of the war, but also show that human resources from "voluntary recruitment" are drying up. This puts the issue of forced mobilisation back on the Kremlin's agenda. The Kremlin's ability to carry out mass mobilisation is the most important, if not the only factor that will allow the Russian command to send large contingents of troops to the battlefield and conduct major military operations in a positional war. Thus, only the ability to mobilise leaves Russia with any hope of achieving military superiority, and ultimately of military victory. At the same time, mobilisation could become necessary for the Russian command in the event of an enemy breakthrough of its defences, as happened in the Kursk region. Thus, the further course of hostilities depends largely on whether the Kremlin decides on a new mobilisation and what form it will take.

The Russian authorities have two options: to announce a new wave of "partial" mobilisation of reservists, similar to the one carried out in the autumn of 2022, or to send conscript soldiers into the combat zone. Media reports about units of conscripts being prepared to be sent to fight in the Kursk region indicate that Moscow is leaning towards the second option. From a practical point of view, this solution would be easier to implement than mass mobilisation. Conscripts could be trained in the military units to which they were assigned during conscription and sent to the battlefield as needed. There are about 7 million men of conscription age living in Russia who have not yet done their compulsory military service. However, such a solution would create political problems for the Kremlin. Inevitably, the corrupt system that provided conscripts with exemptions during the wars in Chechnya will be revived. It should not be excluded that, despite the level of repression and mass state propaganda, sending conscripts to the front could provide an impetus for a broad anti-war movement.

Is Russia Losing its War of Attrition?

It is too early to draw conclusions about the military consequences of the Ukrainian breakthrough in the Kursk region. Fighting there is continuing, and the battlefield is largely hidden by the fog of war. However, the fact that the Ukrainian troops that broke through have been in the Kursk region for more than a month and are still conducting offensive operations, albeit limited, leads to an obvious conclusion. Contrary to previously prevailing theoretical assumptions, based on objective data on population size, size of industrial production, and so on, Russia is beginning to lose in the war of attrition. The fighting in the Kursk region demonstrates Moscow's lack of strategic reserves, forcing serious reconsideration of previous assessments of the combat capabilities of Russian forces and the prospects for future combat operations.

The theory of military art unequivocally states that the key to victory on the battlefield is not a general superiority over the enemy in manpower and military equipment, but the ability to concentrate combat-ready troops in a particular direction, thereby ensuring superiority on that section of the front. Similarly, the experience of combat operations in the Kursk region shows that the most important condition for victory is not a general superiority in mobilisation resources, but the ability to covertly carry out a rapid mobilisation for use in a specific military operation.

There is an impression that the Russian command has understood its limited capabilities and is not planning large-scale operations for the foreseeable future. It is indicative that General Buvaltsev, head of the Main Combat Training Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces, has stated that “current trends in troop training show that combat training has moved mainly to the level of ‘squad/platoon/company’”.¹ From this we can conclude that the Russian command is not planning to conduct operations with larger units such as brigades, divisions and armies in the foreseeable future.

The Russian command was probably planning both now and, in the future, to conduct offensive operations as they are now in the Donetsk region: using relatively small forces in bloody battles to break into the enemy's defences. However, the Ukrainian invasion of the Kursk region has called this strategy into question. The Kursk region is under the area of responsibility of the “Sever” (North) group of force, based on the Leningrad Military District. This grouping has faced heavy fighting in the Kharkov region since May 2024. A reserve – the 44th Army Corps – was planned in Kursk Oblast, but in reality, the unit was not formed and some of the new units were probably sent to Kharkiv Oblast to compensate for losses there.² At the time of the Ukrainian breakthrough, there were only scattered units in the region staffed mainly by conscripts, FSB border guards and Chechen units.

At the same time, according to some sources, after a new mobilisation law came into effect in May, Ukraine more than doubled its number of volunteers and mobilised soldiers.³ The Ukrainian command managed to secretly concentrate 10,000–15,000 troops near the border, masking them with preparations to repel a possible breakthrough of Russian troops into the Sumy region of Ukraine. This explains the success of the breakthrough in the first days of the operation.

1 <http://redstar.ru/glavnaya-zadacha-nastojchivo-usvaivat-nauku-pobezhdats/>

2 [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%91%D0%BE%D0%B8_%D0%B2_%D0%9A%D1%83%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8_\(2024\)#cite_note-32](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%91%D0%BE%D0%B8_%D0%B2_%D0%9A%D1%83%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8_(2024)#cite_note-32)

3 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/ukraines-gamble>

The Russian command did not deploy significant contingents of troops immediately after the Ukrainian incursion to counter the offensive. At least 30,000 to 40,000 troops would have been needed to “dislodge” the Ukrainian invasion forces, but the Russian command managed to deploy no more than 5,000 in the first weeks. In this case, too, elements of the formations fighting in the Kharkiv region were also fighting in other fronts in Ukraine. Bearing in mind the political and moral damage that the Ukrainian invasion is inflicting on the Kremlin, this failure can only be explained by the fact that the Russian command simply does not currently have the required number of troops.

Voluntary Recruitment Opportunities are Drying Up

The lack of combat ready reserves is also indicated by reports that “prefabricated military units” are being created to participate in combat operations; that is, units “assembled” from separate companies and platoons formed from other military units. The combat readiness of such prefabricated units is of a low level. In the Russian army, as was the case in World War II, units are being created from those on “restricted military service” as a result of injury, in order to send them into combat if necessary.⁴ A motorised rifle regiment of the Aerospace Forces has also been formed, to which, according to media reports, soldiers from airfield and airbase security battalions, as well as Air Force technical personnel gathered from all over the country, have been sent. Even members of flight crews were sent to the motorised rifle regiment.⁵ All this is reminiscent of the worst periods of the Chechen wars, when the formation of reserves for the fighting troops was limited to companies or even platoons due to a shortage of personnel. This made a huge impression on Vladimir Putin at the time:

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 to fight. I will never forget this.⁶

If the official statements of Russian leaders are to be believed, any repetition of such a situation is simply impossible and troop level targets have been fully achieved. Putin recently said that there are about 700,000 troops operating within the zone of the “special military operation”.⁷ (According to President Zelensky’s statements, all the Ukrainian armed forces number 900,000.)⁸ According to the Russian authorities, the Russian army has been successfully formed by recruitment on a voluntary basis. Returning to the mobilisation practice of the World War I, the Kremlin pays those who participates in combat operations a salary that is substantially higher than the national average. According to official data,

4 <https://storage.googleapis.com/istories/stories/2023/12/06/dobit-nedobitikh-v-armii-rossii-poyavilis-invalidnie-shturmovie-podrazdeleniya/index.html>

5 https://t.me/fighter_bomber/17554

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

7 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74292>

8 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-08-13/ukraine-kursk-incursion-exposes-russia-troop-shortage?srd=homepage-europe>

540,000 people signed a defence ministry contract in 2023⁹, and another 190,000 in the first half of 2024.¹⁰ However, it has turned out that this huge number of troops – before the war all ground forces numbered about 300,000 – is not enough to form sustainable reserves for a large-scale operation.

There are two possible interrelated explanations for this. First, Russia's losses are as huge as western analysts believe. Since the start of the war in February 2022, at least 350,000 Russian troops have been killed or wounded, according to US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin.¹¹ Total losses could even be as high as 500,000.¹² If Russia is losing more than 1000 people a day, this means that all those who have signed a contract are simply filling the place of those who have been killed or wounded. Second, it is highly likely that actual recruitment figures are much lower than officially stated. According to the calculations of independent Russian researchers, between the autumn of 2022 and April 2024, about 426,000 Russians received a one-off payment for the conclusion of a contract. While the Ministry of Defence (MOD) announced an additional 214,000 personnel, according to MOD data of the same date, 640,000 had enlisted for contracted service.¹³ This can be explained by various types of manipulation of statistics. The responsibility for voluntary recruitment lies with the regional authorities, which are regularly given quotas that they must fulfil at all costs. To achieve this, contracts are often signed with those who are already at the front. They are either people who found themselves in the army as a result of the “partial mobilisation” in the autumn of 2022, or members of volunteer units formed in the same period. Difficulties with voluntary recruitment are also indicated by the fact that, in some regions, the number of those who voluntarily signed a contract in 2023–2024 was significantly lower than the number of those mobilised in the autumn of 2022. Among the regions that failed to recruit enough contracted personnel are Kirov, Kaluga, Sverdlovsk, Murmansk, Khakassia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Stavropol Krai.

The growing difficulties with voluntary recruitment are also indicated by the fact that in an effort to attract people to the army, regional authorities are forced to constantly increase the amount of money paid for signing a contract. In Moscow and St Petersburg, for example, each person who signs a contract is paid about 2,000,000 roubles (US\$ 22,250) as a regional payment. Since this money is taken from regional budgets, richer regions have greater opportunities to fill quotas. In this situation, there is real competition between the regions. The conditions for signing a contract are such that a potential soldier does not have to reside permanently in a particular region to receive money from that region. He just has to travel to the place where a large sum of money can be paid and then go to the front. The difficult recruitment situation is also indicated by the fact that Putin has doubled the one-off federal payment (additional to regional payments) for signing a contract from 200,000 to 400,000 roubles (US\$ 2,225 to 4,500).

However, these financial incentives are becoming less and less successful. Specialist mobilisation commissioners are appearing in industrial enterprises. Local authorities have

9 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6525097>

10 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6525097>

11 <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3806394/austin-underscores-commitment-to-ukraine-security-at-brussels-meeting/>

12 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-08-13/ukraine-kursk-incursion-exposes-russia-troop-shortage?srd=homepage-europe>

13 <https://istories.media/en/stories/2024/08/01/more-soldiers-at-all-costs/>

been advised to be more aggressive in recruiting those facing serious financial problems, such as the unemployed and those who cannot pay alimony or loans. However, since, according to Putin's decree, the contract with the Ministry of Defence cannot be terminated until the completion of the special military operation, which is clearly dragging on, fewer and fewer people are willing to risk their lives even for a large sum of money.

For the same reason, it seems that the decisions by the authorities to use those facing legal action in the war is no longer providing results. At present, convicted criminals and persons under investigation can decide to participate in combat operations in order to avoid criminal penalties. However, this source is probably also nearing exhaustion. According to press reports, the number of prisoners has decreased significantly. Several prisons have even closed.

Mobilisation Again?

Thus, the longer the hostilities last, the fewer possibilities the Kremlin has to recruit into the army on a voluntary or semi-voluntary basis. Meanwhile the Kremlin's ability to carry out mass mobilisation is the most important, if not the only, factor that will allow the Russian command to send large contingents of troops to the battlefield and conduct major military operations in a positional war. Thus, only the ability to mobilise gives Russia any hope of achieving military superiority and ultimately of military victory. At the same time, mass mobilisation might become necessary for the Russian command in the event of an enemy breakthrough of its defences, as happened in the Kursk region. Only forced mobilisation remains to significantly increase the number of troops involved in the war. The Russian authorities have clearly not ruled out such a possibility and have put in place all the required organisational measures to ensure it. Putin ordered the completion by November 2024 of a unified electronic register of all persons liable for military duty based on the databases of the tax service and the Ministry of the Interior, and mandatory reporting was introduced for all employers in Russia. Using this register, mobilisation summonses could be sent out through the state website, Gosuslugi, where 109 million people are registered. The Armed Forces Command believes that the "mobilisation resource" today comprises around 25 million people. (In 2024, this is the entire male population aged 18 to 51, excluding those removed from the military register due to illness.)¹⁴

Despite the seemingly inexhaustible nature of this manpower resource, the possibility of mass mobilisation has clear limits, as was demonstrated during the "partial mobilisation" in the autumn of 2022. First, Russia did not and does not possess the required number of training centres capable of providing military training to the thousands mobilised. As far as can be understood, such training is currently being conducted mainly in nine reserve regiments assigned to specific groups fighting in Ukraine. Combat training is also being conducted in several large training centres deep inside Russian territory. However, this will be insufficient for the possible mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of men.

Second, there is a lack of the necessary number of junior commanders, or officers at the platoon/battalion level. The annual output of 15,000 lieutenants from the military schools is

14 <https://rosstat.gov.ru/compendium/document/13284>

barely covering the losses incurred during the war.¹⁵ A return to World War II practices in the form of short-term officer courses for sergeants with combat experience is unlikely to resolve this problem.

Third, the Russian military industry has reached peak production.¹⁶ The weapons produced are only enough to supply the troops already at war and replace the armaments destroyed in the course of combat operations. It is doubtful that there is the capacity to arm new reservists.

These restrictions could be circumvented by increasing the period of mass mobilisation. There are legitimate opportunities for doing so. The mobilisation announced in September 2022 has not been officially terminated, which in theory allows the Russian government to return to this form of recruitment as soon as it deems it necessary. However, the 2022 mobilisation resulted in the largest drop in Putin's popularity since the war, and the Russian leader took this quite seriously. Therefore, a month later, it was announced that the tasks of the mobilisation had been accomplished and it was effectively discontinued. In addition, a new mobilisation would inevitably raise the question of the possible rotation of those drafted in 2022, which the Russian military command would like to avoid. After all, such a rotation would lead not to a strengthening but to a weakening of war-fighting troops, since soldiers with two years of combat experience would be able to return home.

Conscripts are Going Into Battle

All the above makes it more likely that the Kremlin will decide to use conscript soldiers in combat operations, primarily on Russia's internationally recognised territory. This is already happening in the Kursk region. At the beginning of the Ukrainian offensive, it seems that these service personnel found themselves in the combat zone because of a command error that did not anticipate an enemy breakthrough into internationally recognised Russian territory. It was then that well-trained Ukrainian troops captured between 100 and 300 Russian conscripts with minimal military training. Most of them were serving in the 488th Motorised Rifle Regiment stationed in the Bryansk region and had only been deployed to the Kursk region in the summer to defend the state border. However, as the fighting expanded and the lack of operational reserves revealed itself, reports surfaced of conscripts being transferred to Kursk Oblast from Belgorod, Moscow, Leningrad, Kaliningrad, Tyumen, Murmansk, Irkutsk and Samara Oblasts.¹⁷ Some media outlets have reported that conscripts are already participating in the Russian counteroffensive in the Kursk region.¹⁸

15 Currently, independent researchers have documented the deaths of 3,815 officers, in a total confirmed death toll of 61,831 (<https://zona.media/casualties>). Based on the casualty figures cited by the US defence secretary (350,000), the officer corps losses must be over 21,000.

16 <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russian-military-objectives-and-capacity-ukraine-through-2024>

17 <https://www.moscowtimes.io/2024/08/28/vkremle-nazivali-iskazheniem-realnosti-informatsiyu-obotpravke-prizivnikov-vkurskuyu-oblast-a140514>

18 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2024/09/15/backed-by-tanks-and-covered-by-glide-bombing-fighter-jets-ukrainian-troops-have-advanced-into-russia-along-a-new-axis/>

On announcing the start of the special military operation on 24 February 2022, Putin promised that neither conscript soldiers nor reservists would take part in it.¹⁹ The mobilisation of reservists, as we know, took place in 2022. Will Putin break another of his promises by ordering conscripts to go into combat? Thus far, the Kremlin has not given a clear answer to this question. When Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, was asked to comment on reports of conscripts being sent to the war zone, he avoided giving a direct answer by stating that, "most often such reports are an absolute distortion of reality, and we do not consider it necessary to comment on such reports".²⁰ At the same time, Major-General APTI Alaudinov, deputy head of the Main Military and Political Directorate of the Armed Forces and commander of the Akhmat special forces, has stated that conscripts should serve in the military operation zone. He said that he understood that Putin had decided that conscripts "should not serve anywhere" in times of peace for the country but "now there is a war".²¹ State Duma deputy Andrei Gurulev spoke in a similar vein, recalling that conscripts took part in combat operations during the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya.²² The authorities can declare that even though conscripts in Kursk are fighting Ukrainian troops, they are repelling an enemy attack on "ancestral" Russian territory. This is extremely shaky ground, however, since it de facto recognises that the "old" regions of Russia differ in their status from the newly annexed ones.

It should be noted that, despite Putin's verbal assurances, there is no legal prohibition on sending conscripts to participate in combat operations. According to Presidential Decree 16.09.1999, "conscripted servicemen may be sent ... to perform tasks in armed conflicts (to participate in combat operations) after they have completed at least four months of military service and after training in military occupational specialties".²³ In other words, no additional decisions at the level of the head of state would be required for conscripts to participate in combat operations. Putin can simply "forget" about his promise not to send conscripts into combat, just as he "forgot" in September 2022 about his promise not to use reservists in the special military operation.

The Russian army drafted 130,000 conscripts in the autumn of 2023,²⁴ and a further 150,000 in the spring of 2024.²⁵ The soldiers drafted in 2023 must be discharged by October to November 2024. If the authorities intend to follow the law, it would not be reasonable to send these soldiers to the combat zone as they would have to be demobilised within a month, which is extremely difficult in combat conditions, and there would be no legal grounds to keep them at the front. The President can extend their term of service only if martial law is introduced beforehand. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that the term of conscription service might be increased to two years, as some generals have long been demanding. To this end, parliament must amend the Law on Military Duty and Military Service. If this does not happen, then by the autumn of 2024 the command will only have at its disposal the conscript soldiers called up in the spring of 2024, that is, 150,000 personnel. It will become

19 <https://tass.ru/politika/13997917>

20 <https://tass.ru/politika/21706087>

21 https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/66c2fa139a7947b3a0382236?from=from_main_7

22 <https://dzen.ru/a/ZrfNms7WAUdunBV4?ysclid=m0du5ovix5464745227>

23 <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/14416>

24 <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/19652377>

25 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2024/07/15/1050120-vesennego-priziva-napravleni>

clear in the coming weeks whether the Kremlin will use these soldiers in the battles in Kursk region.

The future intentions of the Russian authorities regarding conscription can be judged by the timing and size of the autumn draft in 2024, which usually begins on October 1. (In 2022 the timing was changed because of the mobilisation that took place in October that year.) It is noteworthy that on 16 September 2024, Putin signed a decree on increasing the Armed Forces by 180,000 soldiers.²⁶ In the past 10 years, the number conscripted in the autumn has fluctuated between 120,000 and 150,000. (A minimum of 120,000 in 2022, a maximum of 152,000 in 2016.)²⁷ Fluctuations are explained not so much by the manpower requirements of the armed forces as by political and organisational feasibility in any given year. Every year, 700,000 to 800,000 men reach the age of 18 and about 280,000 of them are drafted for military service. Thus, there are currently about 10 million men of draft age living in Russia.²⁸ Of these, about 3 million have already completed their compulsory military service. They can be mobilised as reservists but cannot be conscripted for a second time. The remaining 7 million can be drafted.

Troops in the war zone	700 000
Mobilisation reserve (men between 18 to 51 years old)	~25 000 000 ²⁹
Men of conscript age (between 18 to 30 years old) Of which:	~10 000 000 ³⁰
Completed compulsory service	~3 000 000 ³¹
Can be drafted	~7 000 000
Conscripts on active duty	280 000
Of which:	
Fall draft 2023	130 000 ³²
Spring draft 2024	150 000 ³³

26 https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/09/2024/66e815c99a79477240ee95c3?from=from_main_1

27 <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/19652377>

28 <https://rosstat.gov.ru/compendium/document/13284>

29 <https://rosstat.gov.ru/compendium/document/13284>

30 Ibid.

31 <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/19652377>

32 <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/19652377>

33 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2024/07/15/1050120-vesennego-priziva-napravleni>

However, it should be borne in mind that most of these people have legal deferments from conscription for education, illness or family reasons, such as to care for sick relatives or as the father of two or more children. Others evade conscription by illegal means by not registering for military service or avoiding receiving the summons. The new rules for registration and conscription adopted in 2023 should reduce the possibility of evading military service.

However, if the country's authorities admit that they intend to send conscripts to participate in combat operations, it can be confidently predicted that evasion of military service will massively increase. The population will immediately recall the experience of the 1990s, when conscripts were the main source of replenishment of troops for combat operations in Chechnya. At that time, Russia had a gigantic system of organised corruption among medical and social workers, as well as employees of military commissariats that significantly reduced the effectiveness of conscription. The obvious inefficiency of conscription was the reason for the military reforms of 2008–2012, when it was decided to recruit to the armed forces mainly on the basis of voluntarily contracted service.

For the Kremlin, any decision on conscripts participating in combat operations would have both positive and negative consequences. Compared to general mobilisation, such a decision would be much easier to implement. There would be no need to deploy new training centres and barracks. Conscripts could be trained in places of permanent deployment, as they are now, and sent to the combat zone as needed. From the point of view of political damage to Putin, however, it should be borne in mind that the announcement of a new wave of mobilisation will give rise to negative attitudes towards the government among virtually all sections of the population. After all, 25 million Russian men would be at risk of being sent to war. Assigning the role of cannon fodder to hundreds of thousands of conscripts will significantly increase the number of people who will feel hostile to Putin. This is significant because the Russian authorities clearly want to give much of the population the impression that the ongoing war has nothing to do with them.

The experience of the late 1980s and early 2000s indicates that Russian society has a special attitude to the loss of young people taken into military service against their will. Public opinion is clearly divided over those who voluntarily decide to go to war and those who are sent there by force. In the latter case, the public places responsibility for their deaths entirely on the state and its leader. It is also important that most conscripts have relatively young and active parents who are able to vigorously defend the rights of their children. It is no coincidence that the Soldiers' Mothers' Movement was formed in the 1980s and 1990s and became a significant political force. Its members actively opposed the government's war policies and contributed to the ending of the first Chechen war. Putin and his subordinates certainly remember the events of that time. The fact that the Kremlin understands the special attitude of society towards conscripts is evidenced by the extraordinary speed with which exchanges of conscripts captured by Ukrainian troops in the Kursk region were organised. The first exchange took place just 18 days after the capture of the prisoners of war. It is unclear whether the Kremlin would risk relying on repression combined with militaristic propaganda in the current environment.

It is possible that if the military situation in Kursk Oblast stabilises and the offensive in Donetsk Oblast is successful, albeit in a limited way, the Kremlin might decide not to make radical changes to the formation of the armed forces, counting on Ukraine to use up its resources more quickly. In such a case, the Kremlin would seek to use conscript soldiers on the battlefield on the most limited scale possible without officially announcing it. Such a decision would mean a de facto abandonment of strategic operations in 2025 and would give the war a positional character.

Conclusions

1. Ukraine's invasion of the Kursk region has convincingly demonstrated that Russia does not currently have the substantial reserves needed to carry out major military operations in Ukraine. The fact that the Russian population is four times larger than the Ukrainian population has not provided a decisive quantitative superiority for the Russian army during the fighting.
2. The existing system for forming the armed forces with volunteers can no longer fully meet the needs of the army. It cannot be ruled out that in late 2024 or early 2025 Putin might decide to return to compulsory mobilisation in order to recruit larger forces for combat operations.
3. The Kremlin might launch a new general mobilisation or send conscript soldiers to take part in combat operations. Conscripts are already participating in combat operations in Kursk Oblast. The second option is preferable for the Kremlin because it has fewer political consequences, but even these consequences could be significant. It is likely that the Kremlin will seek to use conscripts on the battlefield on as limited a scale as possible.
4. It cannot be excluded that despite the level of repression and mass state propaganda, sending conscripts to the front when losses are so heavy might provide the impetus for a broad anti-war movement.



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