

# MOSCOW ENGULFED BY ANXIETY OVER IMPENDING UKRAINE OFFENSIVE

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Getting anxious, Vlad?

Combat operations in the Donbas trenches remain deadlocked, but their diminishing intensity does not signify an impasse in the course of the Russo-Ukrainian war, which continues to evolve on the ground.

One notable change has been the cessation of Russian long-distance missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure and other civilian targets since the attack by 17 Iranian-made drones (of which 14 were intercepted) on Odesa on April 3 (EurAsia Daily, April 4).

This pause clearly has nothing to do with Orthodox Easter, which was celebrated on April 16, since brutal short-range strikes have continued and an apartment block in Slovyansk was destroyed by a direct hit resulting in multiple casualties (RBC, April 14).

Most likely, the Russian command has tried to stockpile long-range missiles for a new series of strikes, perhaps aimed at disrupting supply routes for the expected Ukrainian offensive, possibly by hitting key bridges on the Dnipro River (Topwar.ru, April 13).

The mounting anxiety in Russia about the much-anticipated Ukrainian offensive operation constitutes the most significant change in the political context of the war, and it goes in parallel with the realization that the long-promised Russian winter-spring offensive did in fact happen — and spectacularly failing to yield any gains at enormous costs (Topwar.ru, April 10).

The mainstream Russian media keeps reporting about the capture of Bakhmut, even if this devastated city is still being defended by the indefatigable Ukrainian forces (Svoboda, April 13). One loud voice in asserting the importance of the Battle for Bakhmut is that of Yevgeny Prigozhin, boss of the Wagner Group, which has been at the forefront of this self-defeating attack (Izvestiya, April 14).

Prigozhin recently published a long text on the developments in Ukraine on his own blog, even though he has several media platforms at his disposal, including *RIA FAN*, which, just last week, was added to the European Union's sanctions list, along with Wagner (Moskovsky komsomolets, April 13).

On many earlier occasions, Prigozhin had criticized Russian military command, and personally Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, but this time, he lashed out against the “deep state” comprised of various elite groups, which, according to the Wagner leader, sabotage those decisions aimed at achieving a victory in the war (Mk.ru, April 13).

Prigozhin's condemnation of state bureaucracy and oligarchs, to whose ranks he has never belonged, provide some corroborative evidence on the examinations of the discord and depression spreading among Russian President Vladimir Putin's elites (Carnegie Politika, March 29).

Perhaps more important, however, are his brief references to the mood of the Russian people, who are “tired of war and losing the taste of victory,” as opinion polls paint a rather disagreeable picture, leaving sociologists with only fragmented data on public concerns about and discontent with the unpopular war (Re:Russia, April 4).

The new hastily approved legislation—two weeks after the start of the spring draft cycle—on sending the draft notice to conscripts electronically and punishing draft dodgers has added to this deepening pool of discontent (Novayagazeta.eu, April 15).

What transpires from Prigozhin's not entirely coherent narrative (likely produced by a gang of hired laptops) is a deeper worry about the forthcoming Ukrainian offensive and probable breakthrough than about those concerns that most Moscow commentators do dare to express (Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie, April 6).

The Wagner chief warns that “defeatist feelings” in the army could result in the degradation of the situation on the battlefield, as happened in the trenches of World War I in 1917. This in turn could cause “global changes in Russian society,” which could turn against the “deep state,” while the supreme authorities, in Prigozhin's opinion, would remain perfectly safe.

The logic of this scenario is definitely twisted, but the worry about personal survival appears sincere, and Prigozhin's conclusion departs quite far from official discourse: *The "special military operation" should be brought to an end immediately by declaring victory and consolidating control over those Ukrainian territories presently occupied (Svoboda, April 15).*

*This minimalist strategy cannot satisfy the ambitions of Putin, who sees a democratic Ukraine anchored to the West as a mortal threat to his regime, but it corresponds to the real capabilities of the Russian army, which has lost the capacity for offensive operations and needs time to rebuild at least half of its 170 battalion tactical groups that the army started with during the re-invasion in February 2022 (Republic.ru, April 10).*

The main flaw in this self-serving proposition is that Ukraine is not going to accept Moscow's unilateral declaration of victory and thus give it time for rehabilitating its exhausted troops.

The delay on starting the spring offensive increases the psychological pressure on Russia's top brass and Putin's court, while hopes in Ukrainian society are being sustained by the celebrations of victories already scored, such as the sinking of the *Moskva* missile cruiser, the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet (News.ru, April 14).

Shoigu found it appropriate to mark this anniversary with snap exercises of the Pacific Fleet accompanied by patrols of long-range Tu-95MS and Tu-22M3 bombers, which were temporarily redeployed from performing combat missions in the Ukrainian theater (Izvestiya, April 14).

Shoigu's main purpose with this move is to create an appropriate context for welcoming to Moscow Chinese Defense Minister General Li Shangfu, who may have developed his own doubts about Russian military potential in the Far East (RIA Novosti, April 14).

Putin seeks to build on the momentum generated by the recent state visit of President Xi Jinping; however, the Chinese leader seems to be more interested in scrutinizing the differences in views recently expressed in Beijing by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and would hardly want to endanger those intrigues by expanding military support for Russia (Nezavisimaya gazeta, April 13).

The plain fact is that it is up to Kyiv to decide when and in what direction to launch its offensive operation, or indeed a sequence of strikes that proves beyond doubt that Russia has lost the initiative and is on course to losing the war.

Time is a factor elusive for clear-cut assessments, but Prigozhin's gut feeling of looming disaster may be a better indicator than Putin's perception of diminishing Western support for Ukraine, who is seemingly misinformed by his own courtiers.

Thus, procrastination could serve to be not only a useful tactical trick but also a winning strategy for Ukraine, provided its leadership is evaluating Russian vulnerabilities precisely and will spring into action at exactly the right moment.

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