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Russia Inflates Battlefield Gains After a Costly Summer Offensive

By Bashir Kitachayev

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Valery Gerasimov during a visit to inspect the Tsentr Group of Forces. **Russian Defense Ministry / TASS**

The chief of Russia's General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, declared in late August that his forces had achieved major victories across eastern and southern Ukraine in their summer offensive. He cited thousands of square kilometers of newly captured land, nearly 150 seized settlements and a near-encirclement of Kupiansk, a key town in the Kharkiv region.

But independent assessments paint a far less rosy picture.

Western analysts, Ukrainian officials and even pro-Russian military bloggers say Moscow's progress is far more modest than the Kremlin claims — and has come at a steep cost in lives and equipment.

The gap between the Russian military's upbeat reports and the battlefield reality helps feed into President Vladimir Putin's conviction that Russia is winning the war, analysts say. That

perception, they argue, undercuts any incentive for the Kremlin to engage in serious peace talks.

Ukrainian military analyst Ivan Stupak said there is no distinct "spring-summer offensive" and that Russia's strategic aims are vague.

"The Russian army has been advancing nonstop since October 2023. Without clear plans, the Kremlin can call any outcome a 'victory' — you can always present the results you achieved as the original plan," Stupak told The Moscow Times.

According to the U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War, Russia has gained about 2,346 square kilometers and 130 settlements since March 1 — roughly a third less than Gerasimov claimed.

Around Kupiansk, which Gerasimov said was half under Russian control, satellite imagery and open-source data suggest Moscow controls only 6.3% of the city's built-up areas.

Some of the discrepancies appear to be by design. The map shown at Gerasimov's briefing, for example, included areas seized as far back as early 2024, inflating the scale of this year's achievements.

ISW's analysts say the aim is twofold: to project strength to Western audiences debating continued military aid to Ukraine and to reassure a domestic public weary of war.

On the ground, Moscow failed to capture a single major Ukrainian city this summer.

The only clear success came in Chasiv Yar, a small but strategic Donetsk region town where months of fighting left much of the settlement in ruins.

Elsewhere, Russian advances have stalled or been rolled back.

Russian troops reached the outskirts of Pokrovsk, a Ukrainian stronghold in Donetsk, but failed to secure control.

In August, Russian units made a swift advance near Dobropillia northeast of Pokrovsk, but Ukrainian forces have since regained some ground in a counteroffensive.

Stupak, citing military sources, said Kyiv is now trying to push the Russians back from Dobropillia. The process is slow and costly, but Ukraine so far retains the initiative in this localized operation.

In Kupiansk, which Ukrainian forces liberated from Russian occupation in late 2022, more than a year of grinding combat has yet to yield a breakthrough.

Gerasimov's claim that half the city is under Russian control has not been confirmed by Ukrainian OSINT projects and has even drawn skepticism from some pro-Russian bloggers.

The pro-Russian Telegram channel Anatoly Radov, citing Russian soldiers, reported that a significant part of the area around Kupiansk is a "grey zone" where small groups of soldiers move through the forests rather than a consolidated occupation.

“They are slowly pushing through our defenses. We’re short on manpower — some units are down to 14% of their strength. A Ukrainian retreat is inevitable, but not on the scale the Kremlin wants,” Ukrainian expert Stupak said.

Russia exploits Ukraine’s manpower shortage by sending small groups to slip through Kyiv’s positions and then bring in reinforcements to seize ground, Stupak said.

The Russian Defense Ministry has released footage of soldiers planting flags in contested areas of Kupiansk, presenting them as evidence of conquests.

But critics — including pro-Russian bloggers — say these are often symbolic photo opportunities rather than proof of lasting control.

“The news about the liberation of half of Kupiansk is doubly sensational, considering that it goes into the report to the Supreme Commander-in-Chief,” wrote Russian military correspondent Yuri Kotenok, referring to Putin. “Now it remains to be seen where this came from and who, in fact, was the author or co-author of this presentation in the General Staff.”

They allege that commanders are sending ill-prepared troops on suicidal missions to produce images that match official statements.

“This is outright betrayal! Don’t the people at the top understand this is the end for the assault troops, our guys? It’s a one-way mission,” the Telegram channel Yasinovataya: Donbas on the Frontline wrote in response to Gerasimov’s statements and the Defense Ministry's videos from Kupiansk.

The human toll of Russia’s offensive is staggering.

Exiled Russian outlets Meduza and Mediazona estimate that Russia has lost roughly 220,000 soldiers since 2022.

For the summer 2025 campaign alone, the Russian analyst Yan Matveev put casualties at about 30,000 killed and as many as 60,000 wounded.

Soldiers describe brutal, attritional tactics as well as “meat assaults” — mass attacks in which waves of troops are sent forward until survivors manage to seize a position.

In some cases, units have lost up to 95% of their personnel before being declared combat-ineffective, according to testimonies on pro-Russian channels. Regulations would normally require withdrawal after losses of 30 to 50%.

At the same time, Russia appears to be rationing its armor.

Matveev noted that tank and vehicle losses fell over the summer, suggesting commanders are holding equipment in reserve rather than risking rapid destruction at the front.

Soldiers often rely on vehicles purchased with personal funds or donations, only to see them quickly destroyed in combat.

“Undoubtedly, the Russian army holds the initiative on the battlefield,” Matveev said. “But

summer 2025 showed the limits of its capabilities and that it cannot bring the war to a decisive victory."

For now, the Kremlin continues to claim steady gains — and Putin, analysts warn, continues to believe them.

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