The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Did Russia's War Effort Change in 2025?

By Bashir Kitachayev

December 30, 2025



Russian servicemen. **Alexander Reka / TASS**

By 2025, Russia's war against Ukraine had hardened into a grinding conflict of attrition, with neither side achieving a decisive strategic breakthrough.

While the front line moved more this year than in 2023 or 2024, Russia's advances remained slow, limited and highly costly, both in terms of materiel and human lives.

Moscow has increasingly highlighted its wartime gains this year in an apparent effort to gain the upper hand in U.S.-brokered peace talks and portray its victory as inevitable.

"Ukrainian forces will have to leave the territories they currently occupy, and then the fighting will stop. If they don't, we will achieve this by military means," President Vladimir Putin said in late November.

But behind the official rhetoric, the reality of the war is more complicated.

“Their progress so far has been lackluster, with high losses that didn’t achieve stated objectives,” military analyst Michael Kofman told The Washington Post of Russia’s battlefield performance in 2025.

The war now resembles less a conventional campaign by a regular army and more a conflict sustained by small infiltration units, volunteer-funded supplies and the mass deployment of cheap technologies.

Putin has claimed that Russian forces captured nearly 5,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory in 2025.

Moscow pushed Ukrainian troops out of their bridgehead in the Kursk region this spring and briefly crossed into Ukraine’s Sumy region, though the advance there soon stalled and the front line barely shifted afterward.

In eastern Ukraine’s Donetsk region, Russian forces nearly completed the capture of Pokrovsk and Myrnohrad after almost two years of fighting.

Related article: Russia’s Claimed Capture of Pokrovsk Comes at a Steep Cost

By the end of the year, they also claimed to have taken control of Huliaipole in the Zaporizhzhia region as well as Siversk in the Donetsk region, where Ukrainian defenses that had held for more than three years collapsed within weeks due to manpower shortages.

Progress was uneven elsewhere on the front, with Russian units advancing dozens of kilometers in some sectors and just hundreds of meters in others.

Yet despite the advances, Russia has yet to achieve a decisive victory.

“The Russian army has held the strategic initiative since 2023. In 2022, Russia failed to achieve a quick victory, and this became a turning point in the war. Since then, the war has turned into fighting on attrition, and almost all changes on the front are tactical, not strategic,” BBC News military analyst Pavel Aksenov told The Moscow Times.

Small-unit warfare replaces mass assaults

Taking advantage of Ukraine’s shrinking pool of manpower, Russian forces in 2025 increasingly relied on small assault groups rather than large armored formations. These units probe weak points, infiltrate Ukrainian positions and gradually build up forces in key areas, enabling incremental territorial gains over time.

This approach proved effective around Pokrovsk and Myrnohrad and has been replicated across several sectors, analysts say.

It reflects a broader shift away from traditional large-scale attacks, which have become increasingly costly in an environment saturated with surveillance and strike drones.

The “grey zone” between Russian- and Ukrainian-held territory has expanded to several kilometers in some areas.

Drones dominate the airspace, while small infantry units operate on the ground in dispersed formations, relying on concealment under constant threat of attack.

Drone advantage tilts toward Moscow

According to analysts at the Atlantic Council, the drone war began to tilt in Russia's favor in late 2024, a trend that accelerated in 2025.

Russian commanders prioritized scale and reliability, deploying fiber-optic drones guided by physical cables that are largely immune to electronic jamming.

These systems played a key role in Russia's early 2025 operation to force Ukrainian troops out of the Kursk region, where fiber-optic drones targeted ammunition trucks and disrupted supply lines.

Moscow later applied similar tactics on southern and eastern fronts, ambushing Ukrainian vehicle columns well behind the front line.

By late 2025, Russia had created centralized drone units that train operators through a master-apprentice system and conduct targeted strikes against Ukrainian positions and supply routes.

Neutralizing Ukrainian drone teams has become a key objective in order to give Russian operators greater freedom to maneuver closer to the front.

Related article: Russian Low-Cost Drones Are Changing the Face of Its War in Ukraine

Still, Aksenov argued that drones alone do not explain Russia's battlefield success.

"You cannot say that drones became a silver bullet that fully changed the character of the war. They are indeed very important, but not the only factor. For example, guided aerial bombs are also very important for Russia, as well as artillery and precision missiles," he said.

Russia has made extensive use of guided aerial bombs, including heavy munitions weighing up to three tons, to destroy Ukrainian defensive positions.

Logistics strain

While the Kremlin replenishes its forces with new contract soldiers and the defense industry has been fully mobilized — often using imported components from countries like China and Iran — analysts say the Defense Ministry has failed to establish a reliable and centralized supply system.

Volunteer groups, pro-war bloggers and private initiatives raise money from soldiers and civilians to purchase drones, communications equipment, body armor, vehicles and even basic items such as tires.

Modified civilian vehicles, many of which survive on the battlefield for just a few days before being destroyed, are used for logistics support and troop transport.

This informal wartime economy has helped sustain operations but remains chaotic and uneven. Some units are well supplied with drones and equipment while others operate with minimal support.

Aksenov said these problems reflect a fundamental mismatch between Russia's pre-war planning and the realities of a prolonged conflict.

A slow war of attrition requires a different economic and industrial model, one that Russia has struggled to build, he said. Despite this, Russian forces continue to advance because they have found tactics that work and adapted to drone- and artillery-heavy warfare.

False reporting clouds battlefield reality

Another persistent issue plaguing Russia's army is its practice of inflating its reporting from the front.

Russian field commanders frequently report settlements captured before fighting has actually ended, a practice that pro-war bloggers refer to as "capture on credit." Troops are then sent into costly assaults to make those claims real.

Commanders first reported in August that Russian forces had captured Kupiansk in Ukraine's Kharkiv region, even as fighting for the city continued. Ukrainian forces retook the eastern railway hub in September.

The Russian army claimed to have captured Kupiansk again on Nov. 20, but by December had still failed to secure the city, despite senior officers reportedly receiving awards for its capture. Ukrainian officials said counterattacks later regained parts of the city.

False claims about battlefield achievements happen on both sides, but Russian commanders exaggerate their success more often, Aksenov said.

Once a town is officially declared captured, units still fighting in the area may receive less support, leaving them especially vulnerable to new attacks.

No path to decisive victory

Overall, analysts say Russia has adapted more effectively to drone- and artillery-heavy warfare over the course of 2025, shifting toward small-unit operations supported by unmanned systems.

At the same time, Ukraine's defensive capacity continues to erode due to shortages of manpower and equipment, which gives Russia local opportunities to push the front forward.

But without a decisive breakthrough, those dynamics are unlikely to change, Aksenov said.

"I don't think Russia can shift toward making decisive offensives. Even if they manage to break through the Ukrainian front, a breakthrough requires a significant number of troops," he said.

"Russia does not currently have a substantial enough force on any section of the front.

Ukraine achieved exactly this kind of deep advance in the Kursk region, but we all saw how that ended," he concluded.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/12/30/how-did-russias-war-effort-change-in-2025-a91570