# Winning by Adapting: Battlefield Adaptation in the Long Russo-Ukrainian War

*Thursday, 29 June 2023 15:00 (20 minutes)*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 inaugurated a high-intensity conventional war whose duration exceeds most comparable conflicts since the Korean War. Many of the wars scrutinized by Western militaries—such as the 1973 Arab-Israeli War (19 days), 1982 Falklands War (72 days), 1991 Gulf War (42 days) or 1998 Kosovo War (78 days)—pale in their duration to the one currently unfolding. The length of this war, in turn, has elevated a hitherto less critical factor—battlefield adaptation—to a position of primary importance.

Our research compares draws upon unique data including interviews with mid-level Ukrainian commanders and information provided to us by Ukraine's state-owned defense manufacturer (Ukoboronprom) and the British MoD's lessons learned team.

To preview our conclusions, both sides have demonstrated some capacity for adaptation. However, Ukraine's aptitude for adaptation has far outstripped Russia's because it empowers both bottom-up adaptation by soldiers and mid-level officers as well as top-down adaptation led by the military's senior leadership.

Ukraine's military—enabled by civil society—is demonstrating a high capacity for both bottom-up and top-down forms of battlefield adaptation. Ukraine's company and battalion commanders, in particular, enjoy significant leeway to experiment and oftentimes draw upon civil society organizations for equipment or technical expertise they need. Oftentimes individual units'creativity in adapting to the circumstances they face exists in a state of creative tension with the General Staff's efforts to generate larger and more standardized formations.

Russia's combination of a fragmented command structure and rigidly top-down command culture has, meanwhile, stifled bottom-up adaptation. What adaptation Russia has demonstrated is therefore overwhelmingly of the top-down nature. Pivotal decisions to target civilian infrastructure, mobilize larger formations and compel lesser quality (Wagner or DNR/LNR) infantry to provide the sacrificial "first wave"in assaults all fit this pattern.

## Are you a PhD student or early-career researcher?

No

## What discipline or branch of humanities or social sciences do you identify yourself with?

Political Science (Kristen Harkness, Marc DeVore and Michael Hunzeker), Social Anthropology (Taras Fedirko)

## If you are submitting an Open Panel proposal, have you included all four abstracts in attachment?

No, I am submitting a Closed Panel abstract

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