

## Ukrainians defending the frontiers of Soledar. Day 323 of the war

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Over the past two days, the Russian offensive in and around Soledar has slowed down. The Ukrainian army is still defending itself in localities east of the Bakhmutka river, from the northern suburbs of Bakhmut through Krasna Hora, the western outskirts of Soledar, to the railroad station at Sil. Almost the entire area of the town, except for its western outskirts, is under Russian control. Near Bakhmut, the aggressor has not recorded significant successes. The main centres of fighting are the heavily fortified Klishchiivka area and the southern and eastern outskirts of the town, which Ukrainian troops are successfully defending.

In the area of Svatove, Kreminna, Siversk, as well as on the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia fronts, there have been local firefights combined with an exchange of artillery fire. The largest clashes took place in Marinka (since 24 February, Russian forces here have advanced between 1 and 3 km from the pre-war demarcation line) and along the Svatove-Kreminna road. However, they did not bring any significant changes in the positions of the warring parties.

Russian artillery and aviation continue to shell and bombard Ukrainian army positions, the frontline zone and some villages in the rear of the frontline. Rockets have fallen on Lyman, Chasiv Yar, Kostiantynivka, Kramatorsk and Zaporizhzhia. Of the civilian facilities outside the combat zone, Kherson and towns in the Kherson oblast near the right bank of the Dnieper were the primary targets of artillery shelling.

On 11 January, during a meeting of the presidents of Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine in Lviv, Andrzej Duda announced that Poland was ready to provide Kyiv with one company of Leopard-2 tanks. A day later, the Finnish president Sauli Niinistö declared that his country was also ready to provide a small number of these tanks, with Germany's consent, and as part of a possible agreement among European countries. At the same time, a UK government spokesman confirmed that London is willing to provide Ukraine with tanks from its own resources, which should be read as confirmation of earlier unofficial reports that they are ready to provide Challenger-2 vehicles.

Vasily Bodnar, Ukraine's ambassador to Ankara, has dismissed reports that Turkey has supplied Ukraine with cluster munitions, as *Foreign Policy* had previously reported. According to Bodnar, this could be part of an information war targeting Ukraine and Turkey. At the same time, he noted that his country is adhering to international norms and has not used cluster munitions in the war against Russia.

On 11 January, Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu appointed Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov as commander of the so-called combined 'special operation' force group in Ukraine. The former commander Sergey Surovikin, who was appointed on 8 October last year, has been moved to become one of Gerasimov's three deputies (the others are ground forces commander General Oleg Salukov and Deputy Chief of General Staff Aleksei Kim). The official communiqué justified the changes in terms of "raising the level of command for the special operation," "the need to organise closer cooperation between troops," and "improving the quality of support and the effectiveness of command & control for the army groupings". Under Surovikin's command, Russian forces withdrew from Kherson in order to avoid further losses, and concentrated their efforts on fighting in the Donbas. Surovikin was also responsible for launching massive missile attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. According to Kyiv, these frequent personnel changes in the Russian forces' command structures indicate that they are having problems in directing the operation.

On 12 January, the Chairman of the State Duma's Defence Committee Andrey Kartapolov announced that there are plans to raise the upper age limit for military conscription by three years (from 27 to 30) in the near future, although the lower limit will remain the same as before (18). The increase in the age of conscription will take effect in the spring, and the new rules will be implemented gradually over the next three years. The idea to make changes in this direction was first raised by Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu late last December.

On 11 January independent Belarusian media, based on information gleaned from railroad employees, reported that 750 Russian soldiers had arrived from Omsk in the Vitebsk oblast. On the same day, another military transport carrying some 400 troops was diverted from Belarus to the Voronezh oblast, from where they will go to units fighting in Luhansk oblast. The nature of the Russians' movements testifies to the regrouping of troops in Belarus and the rotation of some of them: certain personnel are headed to Donbass after field training. However, no Russian military build-up has been noted near the Belarus-Ukraine border. A day later, the commander of the Russian ground forces, General Salukov, inspected Russian units stationed in Belarus and assessed the state of combat coordination with Belarusian units.

On 11 January, a representative of Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's cabinet in charge of military and national security issues, Valery Sakhashchyk, reported that a 'private' military company is being created in Belarus. The basis of this unit is the security company GardServis, established in June 2020 with the acquiescence of the Minsk government. It has been licensed to use firearms, and in recent months has increased the number of its employees (by adding reservists who formerly served in special operations forces and special law enforcement units) from about 500 to more than 1000. They are being trained at Belarusian military training grounds. According to Sakhashchyk, GardServis could be used as a façade to prepare sabotage and reconnaissance groups. A dedicated training centre, where special forces had previously trained, has been put at the company's disposal.

On 12 January Oleksiy Hromov, the deputy chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of Ukraine, indicated that in the near term, enemy troops will try to reach the administrative borders of the Donetsk oblast, and will further intensify operations to seize

the left-bank part of the Zaporizhzhia oblast. The General Staff also predicts that the Russians will continue to launch missile and air attacks on critical infrastructure facilities situated throughout Ukrainian territory. Hromov added that to this end, Russia has announced large-scale operations, including an increase in the total number of armed forces to 1.5 million people and the creation of at least 20 new divisions. The General Staff believes that the Kremlin is preparing for a prolonged confrontation and large-scale warfare.

### Commentary

- Both sides in Soledar have been exhausted by two weeks of intense fighting conducted in very difficult conditions. The temperature dropped below -15°C, numerous cases of frostbite and even deaths from hypothermia have been recorded. The Russians found themselves in much the worse situation; they attacked fortified Ukrainian positions in the city, but the cellars and salt mines gave the defenders the opportunity to organise rest and supplies. In addition, individual equipment for the Russian units, which is crucial in conditions of such severe cold, is in much worse condition than that of the Ukrainian brigades fighting in Soledar.
- The Ukrainians are assuming that Soledar will be lost. The possible capture of almost the entire town, which before the war had about 10,000 inhabitants, will only be a tactical success for the Russians, which they will have paid for with very heavy losses. It should be remembered that the battle for the town has been going on for six months: in August the attackers seized the industrial facilities in the south-eastern part of the town, and since then have moved forward by about 5 km. The Russians most likely do not currently have the reserves they would need to break through the Ukrainian defences and go out to the wings and rear of the groupings fighting at Bakhmut and Siversk. The fact that most of the Ukrainian units have exited the centre of Soledar in an organised manner is a success. The 46<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> airmobile brigades defending the city have retained their combat value, although they now need to be withdrawn to the rear to rest and replenish their losses.
- Poland's announcement that it will transfer a company of Leopard-2 tanks to Ukraine is the start of a long process, the end result of which could be the formation of a Ukrainian armoured brigade of about 100 such vehicles. First, however, Germany's consent to re-export the equipment to Ukraine is required, followed by a declaration by other countries that they are ready to transfer further batches of these tanks. If these two conditions are met, the complicated issues of training crews and organising logistics facilities will remain to be solved, which will take several months under the most favourable circumstances.
- The appointment of Gerasimov as commander of the troops fighting against Ukraine is a politically motivated decision, intended to prevent Surovikin from becoming a distinguished commander who could aspire to the highest posts. It also shows that his appointment as head of operations in Ukraine last autumn was a tactical ploy calculated to lower criticism from nationalist circles of how the war is being conducted: Surovikin was personally supported by the owner of the so-called Wagner group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov; these individuals went so far as to criticise the General Staff and its head directly, thus diminishing the authority of some of Russia's top brass. In the military dimension, the assumption of control over the

operation against Ukraine by the Chief of the General Staff is intended to help with organising the command system and improve coordination among the various branches of the military. In the propaganda dimension, meanwhile, it indicates the Kremlin's readiness to intensify offensive operations in Ukraine.