

Winter attacks the frontline. Day 642 of the war

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The weather conditions have significantly curbed the activity of the warring parties. On Friday 24 November, a thaw occurred in eastern and southern Ukraine (with temperatures exceeding 10 degrees in places), turning fields and unpaved roads into large mudflats, but Saturday and Sunday saw the return of hard frosts, blizzards in many places and a storm at sea. In these conditions, the fighting on the frontline was mostly carried out by small infantry units, with little support from artillery and armoured weapons. The snow and wind greatly limited both sides' use of observation and strike drones. The only centre of intense fighting was Avdiivka, where the Russians are continuing an operation to encircle the Ukrainian group. They scored minor tactical successes on the eastern flank of the Ukrainian position (in the industrial zone) and in the vicinity of the village of Sieverne. However, these have not significantly changed the armies' positions.

On the night of 24–25 November, the Russians launched their largest drone attack since the start of the war; according to the Ukrainian Air Force Command, the invaders used 75 Shahed-131/136 drones. For the first time, the invaders used black Shaheds, which hampered the work of mobile air defence groups equipped with machine guns, artillery and short-range missile systems & searchlights. The drones also contained carbon fibre elements, which make them less visible to radar systems. Despite these innovations, Ukraine's anti-aircraft defence declared that it had shot down almost all (74) of the Shaheds. The main target of the attacks was Kyiv, where 77 residential buildings and 120 public buildings in the city centre suffered power cuts as a result of damage to high-voltage lines. In addition, falling drone fragments damaged several buildings and cars. No deaths or injuries were reported. The Ukrainian air defence also reported that one Kh-59 guided missile was shot down on the same night.

Another Russian air attack took place on the night of 25–26 November. According to the Ukrainian Air Force Command, nine Shaheds were used, eight of which were neutralised by anti-aircraft defences. On the morning of 28 November, the Russians launched a successful missile attack on an infrastructure facility in Zaporizhzhia, probably using an Iskander missile.

On the night of 25–26 November, the Ukrainians launched a drone attack in response to the Shahed strikes on the previous night. According to a Russian defence ministry communiqué, anti-aircraft defences shot down 24 drones in the Bryansk, Tula, Kaluga and Moscow oblasts, as well as two S-200 missiles over the Sea of Azov. It was the largest Ukrainian drone attack against Russia since late August. Videos published on social media suggest that the Ukrainians used drones similar to the Shaheds. According to a statement by an

anonymous Ukrainian intelligence representative, quoted by the *Ukrainska Pravda* website, around 35 drones were used; their targets were military facilities and arms plants in Tula, Smolensk, Moscow city and Moscow oblast. The attack was intended to signal the defenders' growing ability to launch symmetrical drone strikes against the Russian rear.

On 24 November, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced the donation to Ukraine of 11,000 assault rifles and 9 million rounds of ammunition produced by Colt Canada. On the same day, the Danish parliament approved funding of 23.5 billion kroner (€3 billion) for military support to Ukraine between 2025 and 2027. It also increased the amount to be spent by the end of 2023 by 2.3 billion kroner (€300 million). On 28 November, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced that Allied military aid to Kyiv had so far totalled €100 billion. Given that a few days earlier Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin had estimated the amount at \$80 billion, including support from non-NATO partners (within the Ramstein format), it must be assumed that Stoltenberg had added up the values of the aid both already given and pledged for the future.

In an interview with *The Times* newspaper on 27 November Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council, stated that Russian special services had stepped up their clandestine activities in Ukraine. Their aim, as he put it, is to "drive a wedge between the political and military leadership and stir up anti-government sentiments among the population". He added that Russia was seeking to exploit alleged tensions in the relationship between the Ukrainian president and the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. On the same day, a communiqué issued by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) insisted that any attempts by Russian special services to destabilise the country are being neutralised effectively. According to the SBU, more than 2000 collaborators and more than 300 agents of foreign intelligence services have been unmasked in 2022 and 2023.

On 26 November Mariana Bezuhla, the deputy chairwoman of the Ukrainian parliamentary committee on national security, defence and intelligence, and an MP of the presidential Servant of the Nation party, published a post on social networks in which she stated that Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, had been unable to present a plan of action for the armed forces or the principles under which mobilisation would be carried out in 2024, and called on him to resign. Her action was criticised by a number of politicians, journalists and activists, and members of the committee announced that they would file a motion for Bezuhla's dismissal as, in their opinion, she had discredited the armed forces in a way that could contribute to the internal destabilisation of the state.

Also on 26 November, British military intelligence reported that Russian forces had probably moved some of their air defence missile systems from Kaliningrad oblast to the Ukrainian front in November, most likely because Ukrainian forces had destroyed the S-400 missile systems located there. According to the British, the fact that the Russian defence ministry is drawing down its military capabilities in the Baltic region indicates the difficulty Russia is having with replenishing the losses of certain armaments.

On 28 November Ukrainian media, citing sources in the Ukrainian military intelligence service (HUR), reported that the wife of HUR chief Marianna Budanova was in hospital with symptoms of heavy metal poisoning. It is not known exactly when the poison was administered. Her health was said to have been deteriorating for a long time.

On 24 November, a working group on the construction of military engineering facilities and fortifications consisting of officials from the ministries of defence and digital transformation was established. The group has the status of a temporary consultative and advisory body, and will coordinate the undertakings of the military and executive authorities at all levels to construct military facilities which can ensure effective defence against Russian forces. The construction of fortifications on the first line will be carried out by military units, and the State Agency for Reconstruction and Infrastructure Development, with the involvement of private contractors, will do so on the second and third lines. In order to raise additional funds, a fund has been set up to which donations can be made.

On 25 November, the Ukrainian Ministry for the Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories announced the establishment of a centre for refugees returning to Ukraine via Belarus. It will be located at the border crossing between Mokrany (Brest oblast) and Domanovo (Volyn oblast). Ukrainian deputy prime minister Iryna Vereshchuk indicated that since 24 February last year, around 6000 people, including more than 1000 children, have passed through the designated humanitarian corridor from Belarus.

Commentary

- Despite the difficult weather conditions, the Russians are continuing their assault at Avdiivka, although they have abandoned the use of armoured weapons (except in the industrial zone on the outskirts of the city). They are mostly using the tactics developed by the Wagner Group a year ago, namely continuous assaults by small groups of infantry. Compared to last year's fighting at Bakhmut, these attacks have been noticeably less intense; this is mainly due to the use of regular army units, where the Russian command has to reckon more with losses and cannot apply draconian punishments to them to maintain discipline. At Avdiivka, the assault companies are indeed largely made up of criminals (the so-called Shtorm-Z and Shtorm-V units), but they are a minority of the attacking Russian forces, and they can no longer count on a regular supply of replacements from prisons.
- The Russian army's minor tactical successes in November did not fundamentally change the position of the warring sides at Avdiivka. As late as October, the Russians managed to cross the railway line near Stepove, but since then they have been unable to establish a strong bridgehead there to enable further movement westwards and cut the lines of communication of the Ukrainian grouping near Orlivka. The situation of the defenders, although not easy, is still far from defeat. The Russians' main attacks are being conducted from the depressions in terrain which is under Ukrainian fire; in addition, they have to devote large forces to securing their flanks, which are primarily exposed to Ukrainian attacks in the area of the villages of Pervomayske and Novokalynove. In turn, the biggest problems for the defenders are the growing exhaustion of the brigades, which have been fighting without rotation on this difficult section of the front for many months, as well as the increasing difficulties with supplying them.
- The operation of the humanitarian corridor on the Belarusian-Russian border signals that Kyiv is in working contact with the regime in Minsk; Ukraine wants to support the return of its people who have been displaced from the occupied territories and are still resident on Russian territory. The decision to build a centre near the border with Belarus to

provide care for them shows that the Ukrainian side considers the area to be safe and unthreatened by the hostilities.

