

Ukraine prepares for positional warfare. Day 645 of the war

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On 29 November, Russian troops occupied the village of Khromove, which borders Bakhmut from the west; they had failed to capture it back in spring when they occupied the town. They also expanded the area under their control around the Berkhivka reservoir, north-west of Bakhmut, and also north of Avdiivka, towards the village of Novokalynove. To the northeast of Kupiansk, they advanced to the outskirts of Synkivka which flanks it. They also made slight advances east of Kupiansk, west of Kreminna, where they resumed operations in the forest massif there; and also south-west of Velyka Novosilka on the border of Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. Ukrainian forces repulsed further attempts to eliminate their bridgehead at Krynky on the left bank of the Dnieper, and fortified themselves in the town centre. None of the other moves made by either side resulted in any change. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, after the slowdown caused by poor weather, the intensity of the enemy attacks increased again, with the main focus on Avdiivka and the western outskirts of Bakhmut; more than 20 assaults per day were recorded in each of these areas, with the total number of Russian attacks running at 80-100 per day. In contrast, the number of attempts by the invaders to break through the enemy's positions in the western part of Marinka has decreased.

The Russians are continuing their attacks on the Ukrainian hinterland using kamikaze missiles and drones. On the night of 1 December, they struck in Kryvyi Rih, Kropyvnytskyi and Mykolaiv oblast. According to the Ukrainian Air Force Command, the Russians used 25 Shahed-136/131 drones, 18 of which were shot down; the defenders also allegedly destroyed one missile. On 30 November, the Khmelnytskyi and Odesa oblasts (where civilian infrastructure was reported to have been destroyed) and Novohrodivka in Donetsk oblast were targeted. The invaders were said to have used 12 Shaheds (eight of which were shot down) and two missiles (the defenders claimed to have neutralised one of them). One heat & power station in southern Ukraine was also said to have been damaged by Russian shelling. On 29 November, Ukrainian sources reported damage to civilian infrastructure in Khmelnytskyi oblast, as well as an attack in Mykolaiv oblast. The defenders reported that they had destroyed 15 of the 19 kamikaze drones and two missiles used by the enemy. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the invaders used a total of 26 rockets of various types on 28-30 November. The Air Force Command reported that the airfield near Starokostiantyniv in Khmelnytskyi oblast was under constant Russian attack.

On 28 November General Vladimir Zavadsky, deputy commander of the 14th Army Corps of the Russian Armed Forces, was killed, most likely as a result of a mine explosion. He is the seventh Russian general involved in the invasion of Ukraine to have been confirmed killed, and the third this year. To date, no Ukrainian general has been certified killed in the ongoing

hostilities since 24 February 2022.

Also on 28 November, the EU Council decided to increase funding for the EU mission training Ukrainian soldiers (EUMAM Ukraine) from €61 million to €255 million; the official justification for the decision states that the costs of training have proved to be significantly higher than originally planned. The EU also intends to train more Ukrainian servicemen. So far, the European Peace Facility (EPF)-funded training programme has covered 34,000 soldiers (the original planned was for 30,000), and the number is expected to rise to 40,000 “in the near future”. A day later, in a statement to Western media, Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba confirmed that the EU had so far sent Kyiv over 300,000 of the 1 million artillery shells it had promised (EU officials had earlier stated that the EU would not be able to deliver them before the announced deadline of March 2024).

On 30 November, the UK’s Ministry of Defence announced that the newly-formed Russian 104th Air Assault Division, with three airborne regiments and an artillery regiment, had been redeployed to Ukraine. According to the British, this unit is likely to be poorly trained, and probably does not meet the standards set for the elite Airborne Forces in the Russian army.

On the same day President Volodymyr Zelensky, meeting servicemen in Zaporizhzhia oblast, issued an order to build and reinforce fortifications ‘in all the main directions’, especially in the areas of Avdiivka, Marinka, the Kupyansk-Lyman defence line, as well as in Kharkiv, Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts. Zelensky also pointed out the necessity of erecting fortifications in regions far from the front line (such as the Kyiv, Rivne and Volyn oblasts). He appealed to private entrepreneurs to help construct the necessary engineering structures.

On 29 November, Northern Direction Defence Forces’ spokesman Yuriy Povkh announced that Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups are making eight to ten incursion attempts every month. The enemy’s main efforts are focused on penetrating the territories of Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts under cover of artillery fire. On 1 December, Ukraine’s border service spokesman Andriy Demchenko stated that the activity of enemy sabotage groups in Kharkiv oblast had increased over the last few weeks.

On 29 November Ukrainian media, citing a source in the military intelligence service (HUR), clarified that the wife of its head, Marianna Budanova, had been poisoned by food containing arsenic and mercury compounds. The former deputy head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) Viktor Yahun, in a commentary for the *New York Times*, said that the circumstances of the incident required a detailed explanation. He added that he “would be surprised” if the Russian services had an agent in Kyrlo Budanov’s immediate entourage. Russian propagandists are spreading the idea that Budanov, allegedly suffering from manic-depressive psychosis, is responsible for poisoning his own wife. On the same day, HUR spokesman Andriy Yusov announced that an investigation had been launched into the attempted poisoning of several military intelligence officers as well as Budanov’s wife. The investigation is being conducted by HUR’s Internal Security Board; a decision to involve other law enforcement agencies will be made only after all the circumstances of the incident are known.

Also on 29 November, the speaker of Ukraine’s parliament Ruslan Stefanchuk criticised an article published the day before in the *Economist*, which suggested that there is a serious conflict between President Zelensky and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Valerii

Zaluzhnyi. Stefanchuk denied these “rumours”, and mentioned that the idea was part of the arsenal of Russian propaganda. A day later Mykhailo Podolak, the adviser to the head of the Ukrainian President’s Office, also denied the existence of a conflict between Zelensky and Zaluzhnyi. He stressed that the two were in constant working contact, and that their talks concerned issues related to the conduct of combat operations.

In the evening of 29 November, Ukrainian hackers broke into cable television networks in occupied Crimea and broadcast excerpts of speeches by Zelensky, Zaluzhnyi and Budanov on all channels. The information was confirmed by the occupying authorities. On the same day, citing a source in the SBU, Ukrainian media reported that hackers from the ‘BlackJack’ group which cooperates with the service had gained access to the IT system of the Russian Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. More than 100 terabytes of documents were obtained in this way, including statistics on the number of people taking part in the fighting in Ukraine, the personal data of military personnel, certificates of medical assistance, and data concerning collaborators operating in the occupied territories.

On 30 November, the Ukrainian Centre for National Resistance (CNR) reported that the total number of migrants from Central Asia brought by the Russians into the occupied territories has now exceeded 100,000 people. According to the government in Kyiv, this demographic policy is expected to displace Ukrainians living there. Most of these migrants are currently working in the construction industry, but in the future the invaders plan to offer some of them Russian citizenship. According to information obtained by the CNR, the influx of these migrants has led to the emergence of ethnic-based criminal groups.

Also on 30 November, Ukrainian human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets pointed out that for a long time the Russian government has been disregarding the possibility of exchanging prisoners of war. They are using the lack of such exchanges as part of a disinformation operation to claim that it is the Ukrainian side that is neglecting the chance to free their soldiers there, and to create public disillusionment with the government in Kyiv.

On the same day the head of the police criminal division, Vadym Dziubynsky, announced that 4793 firearms had been confiscated in Ukraine since the beginning of the year, including 1500 automatic weapons. He added that prior to the full-scale invasion there had been 1.3 million weapons in legal circulation, a large proportion of which are now considered lost or stolen.

Commentary

- According to the declarations made by both the warring sides, the winter weather has not significantly slowed down the pace of operations. However, the attacks undertaken by the Russians and Ukrainians involve only small groups of troops, mainly infantry supported by artillery, often without the use of armoured vehicles. The slow progress made by the Russians confirms that in most directions the defending forces are feeling the fatigue of the prolonged war, especially since (unlike the invaders’ troops) they are being rotated far less frequently. The amendments to conscription and mobilisation legislation which Kyiv is prepared are expected to improve this situation.
- The order issued by President Zelensky for the military authorities to proceed with the accelerated expansion of fortifications and engineering barrages (with the help of private business) suggests that Ukrainian forces are preparing for a prolonged period of

positional warfare. It also indicates that the Ukrainian armed forces neglected to work on strengthening the positions they occupied after the fall of Bakhmut this spring; that may make it harder for them to impede the enemy troops' progress in the frontline zone.

