

Deliveries of F-16s to Ukraine delayed. Day 684 of the war

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The situation on the frontline

The situation in the battle areas has not substantially changed. Russian forces have made slight advances westwards and on the north-eastern outskirts of Avdiivka, west of Marinka and west of Kreminna, where they are attempting to reach the line of the Zherebets river. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the number of Russian assaults on the defenders' positions is constant at around 60 per day, with the only drops recorded on 6 and 7 January. According to reports from the front, these attacks are most often undertaken by small assault groups, sometimes numbering just a few individuals, which retreat if they encounter resistance.

Both the worsening weather conditions and the New Year holiday period (unlike the Ukrainians, the Russians remain on the Julian calendar, and celebrated it on 7–8 January) reduced the intensity of the fighting. While the number of hostile attacks may remain at the level declared by the Ukrainian General Staff, and may even increase in the short term, no substantial increase in intensity is expected until the weather improves. Both sides will use this period to rest and recuperate. However, it remains unclear whether the Ukrainians will succeed in rotating and increasing their ammunition stockpiles to the extent necessary to halt further advances by the Russians.

Russian air attacks

On 8 January, the Russians launched another massive missile attack. According to aggregate data from the Ukrainian General Staff, the invaders used a total of 55 cruise and ballistic missiles and eight kamikaze drones. The defenders claimed to have shot down 18 cruise missiles and all the drones. Damage was confirmed to transport infrastructure and industrial facilities in Kharkiv, Kryvyi Rih, Novomoskovsk near Dnipro, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia and Khmelnytskyi oblast. According to General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, military facilities, critical and civilian infrastructure were also attacked. It was reported that four civilians were killed and 38 wounded.

Smaller-scale strikes also took place on 3–7 January, with recurring strikes on Kharkiv, Dnipro, Kropyvnytskyi and Kryvyi Rih with their surroundings and Starokostiantyniv airfield in

the Khmelnytskyi oblast. During the period in question, the invaders used a total of at least 39 missiles and 59 kamikaze drones. Ukrainian forces claimed to have shot down three missiles and 44 Shaheds. On the morning of 9 January, another missile alert was declared in southern Ukraine.

In terms of the scale of the air assault, the Russian attack on 8 January was far less intense than those carried out on 29 December and 2 January. In terms of the number of missiles that Kyiv claims penetrated Ukrainian air defences, however, this latest attack was nevertheless more effective than the attack on 2 January (27 Russian missiles hit their targets on that occasion, whereas 33 hit home on 8 January). When this is juxtaposed with the low number of shootdowns reported by the Ukrainians on the other days, we may conclude that Ukrainian air defences have been at least locally weakened; on 8 January, Ukrainian air defences in Khmelnytskyi oblast were said to have let through six enemy cruise missiles.

The invaders have also improved their strike effectiveness by reducing the number of cruise missiles used in favour of ballistic missiles. Ukraine's air defence has openly admitted that it has no capability to counter them (the exception being the hypersonic Kinzhals, which were allegedly shot down by Ukraine's Patriot systems). This has also translated into a lack of confirmed attacks against Kyiv in recent days, as the city is defended by the most modern and extensive air defence groupings in Ukraine.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

On 4 January, Ukraine launched another attack on Russian facilities in occupied Crimea.

The destruction of an air traffic control post at Saki airfield near Yevpatoria has been confirmed. The Strategic Communication Board of the Ukrainian Armed Forces also reported a strike on the command node of the occupation forces near Sevastopol, and on an ammunition depot in the area of the village of Pervomayske, although this latter has not been confirmed. The Russians claimed to have shot down 10 Ukrainian missiles (including Storm Shadow cruise missiles) over Crimea, as well as all 35 of the drones launched in another Ukrainian kamikaze drone attack on the night of 5 January. On the evening of the 8th, Ukrainian multiple rocket launchers once again fired on Belgorod, which lies 30–40 km from the border.

The situation in the occupied territories

The Russians are continuing their repression in the occupied areas. According to Ukrainian local authorities, the occupation administration is working to change the ethnic composition in the occupied areas. In the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia oblast, residents are being encouraged to find work deep into Russia. Labour migrants are being imported in their places, from Asian countries among others. For example Melitopol, which had a population of 150,000 as of February 2022, now has a population of around 60,000 locals, supplemented by a similar number of Russian citizens who have arrived in the city.

The occupying authorities are stepping up mobilisation. According to the Ukrainian Centre for National Resistance (CNR), as of March this year all 17-year-olds will have to register with military commissions, and a forced mobilisation of doctors, teachers and municipal workers is currently underway.

The occupation forces are being reinforced. According to the CNR, at the beginning of January there were 35,000 Russian National Guard troops in the occupied area providing security in the runup to the March presidential elections.

The war and the internal situation in Ukraine

The Ukrainian security authorities are continuing to combat channels for the illegal smuggling of men evading military service across the border. On 4 January, it was reported that, in cooperation with the Moldovan services, they had 'neutralised' a criminal group that was exporting men to Transnistria and then onward to Moldova after charging sums of up to \$5000.

The war and the internal situation in Russia

The Russian authorities are introducing further legal measures to expand the mobilisation potential. On 4 January, Vladimir Putin signed a decree allowing Russian citizenship to be granted to foreigners who have signed contracts with the Russian Armed Forces or other 'military formations' for at least one year during the war with Ukraine. Their family members will also have the right to obtain citizenship. The current solution provides a legal basis for the recruitment of foreigners – not only those currently on Russian territory, but also those outside Russia.

Western support for Ukraine

On 4 January, the Pentagon announced that the US-organised training of Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fighter jets would continue until the end of 2024. Two days later, citing that country's defence ministry, the Danish daily *Berlingske* reported that the handover of the first F-16s from Denmark to Ukraine would be delayed by six months. According to the newspaper's interlocutors, this has been postponed because the Ukrainian side is not yet ready to use the aircraft at the front. Commenting on the reports, a spokesman for the Ukrainian Air Force Command said that Kyiv had not received any such information from Copenhagen, and was still expecting the planes in the spring.

As the Ukrainian side had originally reported and expected, it should receive its first F-16s in early 2024, with at least one squadron (12 aircraft) expected to begin combat missions in the spring. The training of the first group of Ukrainian pilots in the US, on the other hand, was expected to be completed by the middle of this year. Together with those being trained in Denmark and Romania, these are the pilots who should take delivery of the aircraft

donated to Ukraine by Denmark (which had ultimately committed to providing 19 aircraft), the Netherlands (18) and Norway (between five and nine). If the report in the *Berlingske* is confirmed, the operational readiness of the Ukrainian air force for the first unit equipped with F-16s will be achieved no sooner than the summer. When the Pentagon's declaration is taken into account, however, no real increase in the combat capabilities of the Ukrainian air force can be expected before the first months of 2025. It remains uncertain as to whether the aircraft transferred to the Ukrainians (which have over 40 years of service behind them) will be adequately technically prepared by that time, and the Ukrainian Air Force Command is calling for them to be modernised.

The Ukrainian government is preparing to intensify talks with foreign partners on so-called security guarantees, or in other words, firm commitments to long-term military support for Kyiv. On 12 July last year in Vilnius, the G7 countries adopted a joint declaration of support for Ukraine, in which they announced the start of bilateral negotiations to guarantee long-term commitments to assist Kyiv. On 8 January, President Volodymyr Zelensky approved the composition of a 16-member delegation mandated to hold talks on "the development and preparation of bilateral and multilateral international agreements between Ukraine and other states on security guarantees for Ukraine". It was led by the head of the President's Office, Andriy Yermak, and its members included representatives of the ministries of defence, foreign affairs, strategic industry and justice, as well as the heads of the intelligence and special services. At this stage, the negotiating group is expected to approve confidential guidelines for further negotiations.

Status as of 9 January, 10 am Kyiv time.

