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Local success for Russians at Kupyansk. Day 705 of the war

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The situation on the frontline

Between 19 and 27 January, Russian troops pushed Ukrainian forces beyond the P07 road running between Svatove and Kupyansk, and then occupied Krokhmalne which lies to the west of it (the defenders confirmed the surrender of the village on 21 January), and Tabaivka (on 29 January the Ukrainian command claimed that fighting for it was still going on, but according to other sources it had already moved to the hills west of this village). Ukrainian counter-attacks intended to close the breach and prevent the Russians from widening and deepening it towards the Oskil River were unsuccessful. By 30 January, the invading forces had reached the villages of Berestove and Pishchane, located to the south-west of the aforementioned villages, where the Ukrainians are trying to establish a new defence line.

Over the course of 11 days, Russian subunits penetrated Ukrainian positions 3km to 6km deep along a 9 km-wide strip, thus coming to occupy an area of around 40 km^2. This is the highest recorded rate of advance since Ukraine launched its offensive in Kharkiv oblast and Kyiv regained control of the right-bank part of Kherson oblast in 2022. While larger territorial gains were achieved by Ukrainian forces at the start of the offensive in June 2023, this occurred over a much wider offensive strip, and covered three different directions. The maximum depth of Ukrainian incursion into Russian-held territory during the entire summer offensive did not exceed 8–10 km.

The breakthrough of Ukrainian defences south-east of Kupyansk is primarily of local significance. **If the Russians continue to advance towards the Oskil river, the Ukrainian forces in the area will most likely be forced to withdraw to its western bank. This river will then become a new line of defence, which the invaders will find much more difficult to overcome.** It remains unclear whether the Russians will make any breakthroughs along other sections of the front over the coming weeks, especially where they move into the so-called operational space (mainly in the area of Avdiivka and south-west of Donetsk). However, the invaders have not made any significant progress there over the past week.

Russian reconnaissance and sabotage groups (RSGs) are becoming increasingly active. On 28 January, the Ukrainian border service indicated that the largest number of hostile RSGs were operating in the border oblasts of Sumy and Kharkiv. They have been harassing the civilian population and pushed Ukrainian forces into deploying additional response groups.

Controversy surrounds the circumstances of the destruction of a Russian transport plane. On 24 January an Il-76 aircraft which was reportedly carrying missiles for S-300 systems crashed near Belgorod; Kyiv has not admitted to shooting it down. Russia has claimed that the plane was carrying 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war who were to have been exchanged for Russian prisoners of war that day, and that Ukraine was responsible for shooting down the plane. The Ukrainian military intelligence service (HUR) confirmed that no such swap had taken place, and that Moscow had not asked for airspace security clearance in the Belgorod area. The service also indicated that the Russians had failed to provide evidence of the deaths of any Ukrainian prisoners. On the same day, President Volodymyr Zelensky said that Kyiv would insist on an international investigation.

Russian air attacks

On 27 and 28 January, Russian missiles twice struck the refinery in Kremenchuk. Although it has been closed since 2022, the Ukrainians are still using its tanks (the largest such storage facilities near the front) to store fuel. The Russians also continued strikes with kamikaze missiles and drones on Kharkiv, Dnipro, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia and the frontline regions. According to Ukrainian sources, between 24–29 January the invaders used a total of 44 rockets, of which the defenders shot down four, and at least 44 Shahed-136/131 drones (30 of which were neutralised). On the night of 30 January, the Russians launched another attack using Shahed drones: according to a communiqué from the Ukrainian General Staff, they used 35 in total (15 of which were shot down). The destruction occurred in the Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Kyiv, Kirovohrad, Mykolaiv and Sumy oblasts.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

Ukrainian kamikaze drones attacked Russian refineries: at Tuapse in Krasnodar krai on 25 January, and at Yaroslavl on the 29th. According to some sources, the first attack allegedly caused damage to installations (see '*Ukrainian strikes on the Russian fuel sector*'). The Russians claimed to have shot down the attacking drones, as well as most of the attack drones which the Ukrainians used to strike the border regions of the Russian Federation and occupied Crimea over the past week. On the night of 30 January, 21 drones used by the defenders were downed.

On 27 January, **Ukrainian hackers attacked** the Moscow-based IPL Consulting, a company that implements IT systems at institutions involved in the design and production of components for the Russian defence industry. The hackers, contract IT specialists working for HUR, allegedly destroyed the entire IT infrastructure of over 60 terabytes.

Russian operations against Ukraine

On 25 January **Russian hackers attacked** the Naftohaz corporation, in a large-scale operation during which a helpline and a number of subordinate companies' websites were blocked. The hackers also temporarily cut off access to the Shliakh motor transport control

system and the website of the State Transport Security Service. A failure in IT systems was also reported by the Ukrainian National Post.

Western support for Ukraine

The 18th meeting of the Ramstein contact group of countries supporting Ukraine militarily, held on 23 January, did not yield any significant declarations of new deliveries of arms or military equipment. Germany announced the handover of six Sea King helicopters withdrawn from service (scheduled for delivery in the second quarter of this year), and Canada said it would send ten pontoon boats.

Instead, the formation of further coalitions to strengthen Ukraine's specific military capabilities was announced. Germany announced that it would head the 'Armoured Coalition' and Latvia the 'Drone Coalition'. New participants also volunteered to join previously established groups: the 'Artillery Coalition' (led by France and the US), the 'Maritime Capability Building Coalition' (led by the UK and Norway), the 'Air Defence Coalition' (led by the US and the UK) and the 'F-16 Coalition' (led by Denmark and the Netherlands). The Pentagon announced that Ukraine would receive the first fighters of this type, along with infrastructure and spare parts, before the end of 2024. This announcement indirectly confirmed the already months-long delay in the programme to hand them over to the Ukrainian army; according to the original plans, the first Ukrainian F-16 squadron was supposed to reach operational readiness this spring.

There are problems providing Ukraine with the necessary amount of artillery ammunition. On 28 January, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on American production of 155-mm artillery shells, which was expected to increase from 14,000 per month (before February 2022) to 28,000 (in early 2024). In 2025, the US plans to increase production to 80,000 artillery shells per month. However, these will be needed not only by Ukraine, but also by Israel, Taiwan and the US military. By December 2023 Kyiv was due to have received more than 2 million 155-mm shells from the US, with the vast majority coming from stockpiles.

The French defence minister Sébastien Lecornu confirmed that Paris intends to transfer 3000 155-mm shells to Ukraine every month in 2024, while his German counterpart Boris Pistorius reiterated the plan to send Ukraine 200,000 artillery munitions (an average of 16,600 per month) this year. On 29 January the *Financial Times*, citing sources in the arms industry, estimated that it would take Kyiv's partners two years to provide Ukrainians with a level of ammunition supply comparable to Russia's.

The West is unable to supply Ukraine with as much artillery ammunition as it did during the first few months of the Russian invasion. At the time, the Ukrainian army was using an average of 5000 rounds per day: at the height of the offensive in the summer of 2023, this figure rose up to 7000. Weakening support from the West has meant that by the end of last year the Ukrainians could only fire 2000 missiles per day (barely a fifth of what the Russians had at their disposal in the corresponding period). When the possible deliveries of newly produced ammunition are added up, it is likely that the Ukrainian army may receive even less in the coming months. Even if the Americans were to send their entire production quotas together with the French and Germans (there is no public information on the amount of deliveries by other European manufacturers), they could maintain the Ukrainian

consumption of artillery shells at 2000 per day for less than 24 days per month.

Ukraine's military potential

On 29 January, in an interview with the German broadcaster ARD, President Zelensky put the number of Ukrainian troops at 880,000; at the same time, he stated that the country has an army of one million. Previous figures on this subject were presented in the summer of 2022 by the then defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov, who estimated its size at 1 million soldiers, including 700,000 in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The information provided by Zelensky indirectly confirms Kyiv's problems – which have been observed for some time – with recruitment in recent months and the decline in the level of troop complements.

In the theatre of operations, Ukraine still maintains a numerical advantage over the invaders. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, 497,000 Russian military personnel (including 462,000 from the Russian Armed Forces and subordinate volunteer and mercenary structures) are estimated to be present in the occupied territories.

Russia's military potential

President Vladimir Putin has stopped pardoning prisoners who choose to fight on the frontline. Previously, after a six-month stint in a combat zone, convicts could obtain an act of clemency and return home. Now those willing to sign a contract with the armed forces are given the status of 'conditionally released' by a decision from the prison authorities, and their service is to last until the end of the so-called special operation. Once they have fulfilled their contract, they will be able to apply to serve the rest of their sentence at liberty.

The Russian army is continuing to conscript foreigners. On 25 January, Kyiv noted the presence of mercenaries from Malaysia in Donetsk oblast. This is a further example of foreigners being involved in fighting; previously, Ukraine has reported the presence of Cubans, Nepalese, Somalis, Belarusians and Serbs, among others, within Russian ranks.

The war and the internal situation in Russia

A corruption scandal in the Defence Ministry is unfolding. On 25 January, the Prosecutor General's Office and the Security Service of Ukraine announced the completion of the investigation into a sham contract for the purchase of ammunition. The Ministry of Defence concluded a contract with the Lviv Arsenal company in 2022 which provided for the supply of 155-mm calibre bullets from the Italian company MES S.p.A. 1.5 billion hryvnias (c. $40 million) have been returned to the state budget.

The Defence Procurement Agency has a new head. Marina Bezrukova, who worked at Ukrenergo (the state-owned electricity operator) from 2017 to 2024 as a board member and a director of the supply chain management, took up the post on 29 January. Bezrukova's appointment is seen as the first step towards weeding out corruption and improving the situation in the area of military supplies.


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