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Russians and North Koreans pushing Ukrainians out of Kursk Oblast. Day 1028 of the war

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The situation on the frontline

Russian forces have cleared the salient south of Kurakhove and seized much of the city centre. According to some sources, they also captured the bridge leading to the other side of the Kurakhove Reservoir (having previously taken control of its northern bank). It is likely that not all Ukrainian soldiers managed to evacuate. Fighting continues for Uspenivka junction, through which a withdrawal was possible. **As Russia advances, the defending forces in Kurakhove and south-west of it are in danger of being cut off.** The main, and currently the only, supply route leading from Dnipropetrovsk Oblast still remains under their control. Russian troops are 2 km north and 3.5 km south of it.

A Ukrainian counterattack to push the enemy away from Pokrovsk failed. At the same time, Russian forces occupied further areas to the south and south-west of the city. According to some sources, Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups began to infiltrate it. However, the Ukrainian command has refuted this. The failure of the defence on the outskirts of Pokrovsk was the reason for the dismissal of General Oleksandr Lutsenko, commander of the Operational Tactical Group 'Donetsk'. He was replaced by General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi, who was in command of the offensive in the south in 2023. **The main coking coal mine to the west of Pokrovsk** (responsible for 90% of the country's coking coal output), which is 5km away from Russian forces, **is under immediate threat.** Due to Russian shelling, its owner, Metinvest, has decided to partially halt mining.

The Russians have again cut the northern supply route of the Ukrainian grouping near Velyka Novosilka. Fighting is continuing for Novy Komar along the route, but Russia is the side which is pressing. A longer route from Zaporizhzhia Oblast, also in danger of being cut, remains for Ukraine. Russian troops have made further advances south and south-west of Velyka Novosilka, and only two of the eight villages recaptured in the area during the summer 2023 offensive are now under Ukrainian control. **Russia has also seized further parts of town in the centre of Chasiv Yar and Toretsk** (Ukraine controls the western and northern parts of these towns respectively), and have expanded their gains south of Kupiansk, approaching the next junction on the Oskil River, in Borova (they have 8km remaining).

The Ukrainian-controlled area of Kursk Oblast is shrinking – it now covers less than 500 km2 (at its peak in August they occupied, depending on the source, between nearly 1,000 and over 1,200 km2). The Russians are launching attacks from four directions and practically every day at least one of these has seen progress over the past week. However, while they have been successful in driving the defenders out of more positions, they have still not had any significant success in cutting their supply lines.

According to Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR), on 14 December, the enemy began using North Korean soldiers during fighting in Kursk Oblast. Coordination of their actions with Russian forces is hampered by the language barrier. North Korean soldiers are thought to have opened fire on vehicles used by the Chechen 'Akhmat' battalion by mistake. On 17 December, **a communiqué issued by the Ukrainian army's Special Operations Forces stated that 50 North Koreans were killed during three days of clashes**.

Russian air attacks

On 13 December, there was another massive attack on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. According to General Staff summaries, Russia used between 99 and 102 missiles. Eighty cruise missiles and one ballistic missile are thought to have been shot down, including 11 by F-16 fighters. The number of 193 strike drones reported by the Air Force Command (AFC) included dozens of drones used by the invaders the previous day. In total, according to the AFC, 80 were shot down and 105 Shahed/Geran and similar drones were lost by location.

Facilities in several regions were hit, causing emergency power cuts across the country. Damage to facilities – apart from power generation, mainly transport infrastructure – was confirmed in Kharkiv Oblast, Odesa Oblast (in Odesa, the power supply was restored the following day), Ternopil Oblast (half of it was without electricity), Chernihiv Oblast, Lviv Oblast, Kyiv Oblast and Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast, for which this is thought to have been the heaviest strike to date (the target was again the Burshtyn Thermal Power Plant). Some sources claim that the Kaniv Hydroelectric Power Plant in Cherkasy Oblast was damaged. The International Atomic Energy Agency reported a reduction in energy production at five of the nine active nuclear units. **The enemy also attacked the transmission infrastructure between Ukraine and EU countries.** However, power generation facilities suffered the most damage. This was confirmed by DTEK which on 13 December reported further severe damage to its thermal power plants.

Before and after the massed missile strike, Russia continued to launch pinpoint strikes against the enemy's rear. Excluding 13 December, they are thought to have used a total of 320 strike drones and eight missiles between the evening of 10 December and the morning of 17 December. The Ukrainian AFC reported that 161 drones were shot down and 150 were said to have failed to have reached their targets due to active counteraction by the Defence Forces (the previously used formula 'locally lost' is now put in brackets in AFC communiqués). According to the General Staff, four missiles were also destroyed.

Western support for Ukraine

On 12 December, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken presented details of the 72nd Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) military assistance package, worth $500 million. Kyiv will receive HARM anti-radiation missiles, HIMARS launcher rockets, 155 mm and 105 mm calibre artillery ammunition, Javelin and TOW anti-tank guided missiles, AT-4 anti-tank grenade launchers, and drones and anti-tank ammunition (c-UAS), among others.

A day earlier, Canada's parliament passed the allocation of a further $537 million (764 million Canadian dollars) **for military support to Ukraine.** These are to be used, among other things, for the purchase of ammunition and training. In turn, **on 16 December, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre announced $242 million in support for Ukrainian naval defence**. The funds are to go towards, among other things, demining and training.

Norwegian instructors will start teaching Ukrainian pilots and ground personnel of F-16 fighter jets in Portugal in 2025, Oslo announced on 13 December. The reason for the relocation of the training is that it will be closed from next year in Denmark due to the transition of the air force there to F-35 multi-role combat aircraft. **In 2025, Ukrainian basic training instructors will be prepared in Lithuania**, the Kyiv defence ministry reported on 12 December. The first group is expected to comprise 30 people.

On 13 December Ukroboronprom reported that **a licence assembly of BREN-2 carbines was launched in November**. An agreement to this effect was signed by the company and Česká zbrojovka in February this year. Ultimately, production of this type of carbine is to be located in Ukraine, but – as indicated by other initiatives of this type – this is not expected before the end of hostilities. **The Czech PBS Group, together with Ukraine's Ivchenko-Progress, has developed a jet engine for drones, the production of which is expected to start in the Czech Republic in 2025**. Ultimately, AI-PBS-350 engines will also be produced in Ukraine.

Ukraine's military potential

On 10 December, the Financial Times, citing data from Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, reported that **30 cases of the embezzlement of funds intended for the construction of fortifications were under investigation**. **The total amount of fraud is expected to be 20.1 billion hryvnias (more than $480 million).** The article highlights that the engineering units there are exhausted and that the responsibility for erecting fortifications lies with local authorities. Member of the parliamentary special committee on the use of funds for the construction of fortifications Dmytro Razumkov said that funding is dispersed among regional authorities and that there is no structure responsible for planning and quality control of the work. The lack of coordination means that there are large gaps in the fortification lines being erected, which poses a threat to defence positions being maintained. On 13 December, deputy head of the engineering army board Volodymyr Husar denied the allegations and stated that there were no problems with the construction of the fortifications.

Also on 13 December, **Land Forces Commander Mykhailo Drapatyi declared that the transformation of the land component of the Ukrainian Armed Forces will begin soon**. It will include changes in military recruitment and training, the introduction of the latest technologies in the management of combat operations, the digitalisation of command processes, improvements in logistics and the principles of volunteer support for the army.

Drapatyi stressed that the most important issue is to create a recruitment system that is resistant to corruption procedures. The planned transformations are expected to improve the functioning of the ground forces and remove irregularities that reduce their effectiveness on the battlefield.

Russia's military potential

On 12 December, the Russian independent website Insider published *material confirming* that, despite sanctions, **Russia continues to purchase sniper rifles and ammunition in the West**. A journalistic investigation revealed that over the past three years, companies from the EU, the US and Turkey have increased exports of these weapons to Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, from where they are re-exported to the Russian Federation. Kyrgyzstan, for example, purchased more than 4,000 rifles from Italy in 2023. In the same year, small arms exports from Turkey to Georgia amounted to more than 18,000 units. The text also indicates that Luxembourg-based holding company Beretta has established business contacts with Russian Eagle, controlled by arms dealer Mikhail Khubutia.

On 16 December, **head of the Moscow defence ministry college, Andrei Belousov reported that 472,000 men had been mobilised this year**, and assured that more than 1,200 new contracts were being signed every day. He also announced the creation of a new type of unit, which he called 'unmanned systems troops', and promised that their formation could be completed by the third quarter of 2025.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

On 11 December, Ukrainian ATACMS missiles struck Taganrog in the Rostov Oblast. Most likely they fell on the Beriev air complex. According to the Russian defence ministry, the target was the local military airport, while local sources reported hits on the company's premises. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, drones there attacked a fuel base in the Bryansk Oblast on the same day. On 14 December, the target of the drones was a fuel base in the Oryol Oblast, where a strike resulted in a fire. On 12 and 15 December, Ukrainian drones attacked local Interior Ministry facilities in the Chechen capital Grozny.

On 12 December, **Mikhail Shatsky, deputy designer general and head of the software department of the Mars research and design office,** part of the Rosatom corporation, **was shot dead** in an HUR operation near Moscow. Shatsky was responsible for the modernisation of Kh-59 cruise missiles and the development of new types of drones.

On 17 December, **the head of the radiological, chemical and biological defence service of the Russian Armed Forces, General Igor Kirillov,** and his assistant, **were killed in an explosion in Moscow**. The bomb was installed in a scooter parked at the entrance to the building where he lived. The Ukrainian media believes that the attack was organised by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). The day before, it had been charged Kirillov in absentia with committing war crimes with chemical agents.

On 13 December, **the SBU launched a chatbot 'Unmask the FSB' on Telegram messenger, through which one can provide information about recruitment attempts by Russian special services** and indicate the social network or messaging service through which they operate. The initiative is a reaction to the increasing number of arson attacks on military vehicles or facilities used by the military or police. It is mainly minors who are responsible for these acts.

Russian operations against Ukraine

On 10 December, human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets reported that **109 Ukrainian prisoners of war had been executed by Russia this year**. Between 2022 and 2023, Russian soldiers executed at least 177 captured soldiers.

On 11 December, Microsoft published *a report* indicating that **the FSB-linked hacking group Secret Blizzard is focusing on gathering intelligence and installing malware on the Ukrainian military's digital infrastructure**. Attacks are underway on devices using the Starlink satellite communications system, which plays a vital role in Ukrainian military operations. According to Microsoft, the Secret Blizzard group has a long history of destructive activities targeting the digital assets of foreign ministries, embassies, government agencies and defence-related organisations around the world.

