

Russians build bridgeheads on the Oskil River and the Dnipro. Day 1034 of the war

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 The situation on the frontline

Russian forces continue to advance in the western part of Donetsk Oblast. They have seized more towns south and south-west of Pokrovsk and south-west of Kurakhove, where the Ukrainians have retreated to the north bank of the Sukhi Yali River. The seizure of Uspenivka junction de facto prevents Ukrainian soldiers remaining in areas cut off by the enemy from coming to their aid.

Russian troops have also approached Velyka Novosilka from the south and south-west, and **according to some sources, they are a few hundred metres away from physically cutting the last supply route for the Ukrainian grouping in the area of this town from Zaporizhzhia region.**

Russia has established a bridgehead on the right (western) bank of the Oskil River north of Kupiansk. Fighting for the local road junction of Dvorichna is ongoing – the systematic expansion of this bridgehead (it is about 5km long) and the progress at Dvorichna indicate that the Russian landing attempts on the right bank of the Oskil in previous weeks were of a reconnaissance nature, aimed at testing the possibility of a landing. Removal of the bridgehead would require the Ukrainian command to draw on additional forces, which currently appears to be beyond the local capabilities of the defenders.

On 20 December, Kherson came under massive shelling. The targets included Ukraine's logistics. According to the local administration, Russia used almost a thousand shells over 40 minutes. The electricity supply to tens of thousands of the region's residents was cut off and restored over the next 24 hours. On 21 December, in turn, more than a dozen guided aerial bombs are thought to have fallen on the city area. **The shelling and bombing were most likely a cover operation, which allowed the Russians to retake their positions on the banks of the Dnipro in the area of the destroyed Antonivka (road) bridge,** in so-called Dacha area. Russian forces also became active on the islands in the mouth of the Dnipro south of Kherson. These activities probably precede a diversion to the right bank of the river to recognise the potential of the defenders once some units have moved from there to the Kursk region.

Russian troops have regained control of further villages in Kursk region, making it difficult to supply enemy units in the northern part of the areas they occupy. They have also seized

further parts of Chasiv Yar and Toretsk, where, according to the Ukrainian side, street fighting is expected to be particularly intense. Russia also made progress in other directions, with the exception of areas north of Kharkiv and Siversk in the northern part of Donetsk Oblast. **The Ukrainians, meanwhile, are thought to have regained previously held positions south of the village of Kamianske in Zaporizhzhia Oblast.**

Russian air attacks

On 20 December, Russia carried out one of its most serious rocket attacks on Kyiv this year. It caused destruction in three areas of the city; one person was killed and 13 injured. Among the buildings damaged were six embassies (Albania, Argentina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Palestine and Portugal). Some of the buildings were cut off from central heating, which was restored over the next 24 hours. Targets included arms industry enterprises and the disused Zhuliany airport, where, according to most sources, elements of the Patriot system are deployed. The Ukrainian side gave contradictory information about the strike – the Air Force Command announced that Russia had used five Iskander-M missiles, all of which were shot down, and the damage was caused by falling debris. Kyiv's Municipal Military Administration reported five Iskander-M ballistic missiles and three Kinzhal hypersonic missiles with, for the first time, no reports of shootdowns. In its daily summary, in turn, the General Staff reported that on 20 December Ukraine destroyed only four cruise missiles, and that the enemy had used a total of 19 missiles that day, with more than just the capital as their target.

The primary target of Russian drones and missiles remains the immediate rear of the Ukrainian military. Attacks included Kryvyi Rih (18 and 19 December), which saw damage to central sewage collectors and the power grid, and also Kharkiv, Sumy and Zaporizhzhia (20 December). Damage to storage and energy infrastructure occurred in Kyiv Oblast (20 and 23 December). According to some sources, drones also attacked airports in the western part of the country, mainly Starokonstantyniv in Khmelnytskyi Oblast. From the evening of 17 December until the morning of 23 December, Russia is thought to have used a total of 519 strike drones and 33 missiles. The defenders declared 292 drones and five to seven missiles down, and 215 drones were described as locally lost.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

On 20 December, Ukrainian drones and missiles struck the Novoshakhtinsk refinery in Rostov Oblast, resulting in a partial halt in production. A day later, they attacked Kazan in Tatarstan – hitting two high-rise buildings and the premises of one of the companies. Three days later, Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR) reported that a depot of components for the construction of Shahed-136 drones had been destroyed in the strike on Tatarstan. Also among the targets of Ukrainian drones, and according to some sources also ATACMS and Storm Shadow missiles, were **a chemical plant located in Kamensk-Shakhtinsk in Rostov Oblast (18 December), where a fire occurred, and – without serious consequences – a fuel base in the Oryol Oblast (22 December).**

On 20 December, ATACMS missiles fell on Rylsk in the Kursk region. According to some reports, they were targeting the headquarters of the Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade. Depending on sources, the Ukrainians used between six and ten missiles, including those with cluster warheads. The Russians have publicised casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure, most likely the result of falling shrapnel from the downed missiles.

Western support for Ukraine

Kyiv has received two Mi-8 transport helicopters and one Bell-412HP utility helicopter from Poland, Ukraine's ambassador to Warsaw Vasyl Bodnar announced on 21 December. The machines, which come from the resources of the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs (they were withdrawn from service in mid-2023 with the intention of being handed over to Kyiv), will be sent to Kharkiv National University of Internal Affairs for training. **Ukraine, meanwhile, will not receive the F-16 fighter jets previously promised by Belgium until the end of the year** (*Le Soir* reported on 18 December). Among the reasons cited were delays in deliveries to the Belgian Air Force of the first F-35 multi-role combat aircraft, a shortage of spare parts for the F-16s and a lack of sufficient numbers of trained Ukrainian pilots.

The **UK will provide £225 million (\$283.5 million) worth of military support to Ukraine**, Reuters reported on 19 December. Of this, £92 million is to be used mainly for the purchase of drones of various categories for the Navy, £68 million for air defence (including radars and anti-drone systems), £26 million for technical support and spare parts for previously delivered weapons, and £39 million for other purposes (including the maintenance of more than 1,000 electronic warfare systems designed to combat drones). On the same day, **Denmark's Ministry of Defence announced a 23rd military support package worth DKK 2.1 billion (\$294 million).** The funds will go towards strengthening Ukraine's aviation and air defence – including maintaining the country's F-16 fighter jets. **On 20 December, the Norwegian government announced a \$232.5 million transfer to the UK-coordinated International Fund for Ukraine.** These will be allocated in line with the money pledged by London: £115 million for Navy equipment, £85 million for air defence, and £32.5 million for technical support and spare parts for previously delivered weapons.

Germany has sent a previously promised sixth IRIS-T air defence system and Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns with ammunition to Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced on 20 December. Two days earlier, **the German defence ministry had announced the relocation of a heavy weapons repair centre from Slovakia to Germany.** The decision was explained by the “complexity of operational processes” and differences in the interpretation of European customs regulations. The centre in Michalovce, Slovakia, had been in operation since 2022 and dealt with, among other things, PzH 2000 self-propelled howitzers, MARS multiple rocket launchers and Gepard guns. This year, the government in Bratislava announced an expansion of the repair base. Berlin is coordinating the repair of German-supplied armaments also in Lithuania (e.g. PzH 2000) and Ukraine (e.g. Marder infantry fighting vehicles). Leopard 2A4 tanks donated to Kyiv by several countries are being overhauled in Poland. On 17 and 18 December, **Rheinmetall announced the conclusion of a contract with the German government for the overhaul of a further 20 Marder 1A3s for Ukraine, and – with the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence – a contract for tens of thousands of**

modular artillery charges for 155 mm calibre cannons. In both cases, deliveries are planned for the first half of next year.

At the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) summit in Tallinn on 17 December, the leaders of its constituent countries agreed to provide Kyiv with €12 billion in military support in 2025. It was also reported that the nine JEF countries (led by the UK and Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Iceland, Lithuania, Latvia, Norway and Sweden) have provided training for more than 50,000 Ukrainian servicemen since 2022.

Russian operations against Ukraine

On 20 December, **Russian hackers linked to military intelligence carried out a massive cyber-attack on the IT infrastructure of Ukraine's justice ministry.** The functioning of databases was paralysed and the hackers stated that they had destroyed all the data they accessed, including backups on servers in Poland. Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishina confirmed that the work of the Unified State Register (containing, among other things, registers of court cases, civil status acts, legal persons and individual entrepreneurs or mortgage documents) had been suspended. On the same day, the Ministry of Defence reported that all military electronic registers were operating without interruption. The exception is the inability to process requests (e.g. for deferment from military service) in the 'Reserve+' application.

On 18 December, human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets indicated that **Russian intelligence services are seeking to involve the families of prisoners of war in moves to destabilise the situation in Ukraine.** In order to create public discontent, they are delaying the exchange of prisoners. At the same time, there have been cases where families of POWs have approached the Russian authorities directly, with the latter making further contact with the prisoner conditional on the implementation of intelligence activities.

Russia's military potential

On 18 December, **the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) announced that communications from Russian forces confirming casualties among North Korean soldiers had been intercepted.** Among other things, it was discovered that more than 200 wounded servicemen from the country had been brought to a hospital in Moscow Oblast over the course of several days.

A day later, **South Korean intelligence reported that around 100 North Korean soldiers had been killed in the Kursk region and 1,000 were injured in various ways.** The high losses are due to inexperience in fighting drones and unfamiliarity with the terrain where the military is involved in combat operations.

Ukraine's military potential

On 17 December, Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Oleksandr Syrskyi referred to media reports indicating irregularities in the construction of fortifications. He

acknowledged that **in seven oblasts (including Zaporizhzhia) work on erecting military engineering facilities should be intensified.**

The following day, Lubinets negatively assessed the idea of lowering the mobilisation age to 18. He stressed that **conscription of young men who do not yet have families or children would jeopardise the future of Ukraine.** In contrast, on 19 December, President Volodymyr Zelensky once again noted that it was now more urgent to supply the army with Western weapons and ensure the training of soldiers. He added that Western demands to lower the mobilisation age are "not very fair".

On 21 December, the UK's Guardian, citing anonymous sources in the Ukrainian military, reported that staff shortages at the front have become so acute that the General Staff had ordered air defence units to transfer some personnel to infantry units. The staff dismissed the reports as unreliable, but acknowledged that such transfers – though small – are taking place. Air Force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat stressed that "Western air defence operators are not being diverted to the infantry" and that the occasional transfer of air defence personnel does not impact on its effectiveness.

A day later, **Ambassador Bodnar said that the Ukrainian Legion currently being formed had received more than 1,000 applications for service** and that in November the first contracts had been signed and the formation of the first 'squad' had begun. He stipulated that he could not provide a specific number for the admissions as this was classified information. In mid-November, it was reported that the total number of applications for admission to the Ukrainian Legion in Poland had risen to 600.

