

The Russians are building their own Starlink system.

Day 1490 of the war

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The situation on the frontline

Russian forces continued their offensive on several fronts in the Donbas, making the most significant advances east of Sloviansk. Fighting is ongoing north-east of Rai-Oleksandrivka, which is the last major stronghold of Ukrainian defences east of Sloviansk. In Kostiantynivka, fighting has shifted entirely to the main part of the town. Russia has taken control of most of Hryshyne (which blocks an attack on Dobropillia from the south) and has also advanced towards the town from the east, building up positions for a direct assault. Fighting continues for Novyi Donbas – the last settlement before Dobropillia, 5 km away.

Ukrainian forces have launched further counterattacks in the Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, re-entering Stepnohirsk on the Dnipro. Minor changes in Russia's favour have occurred in the eastern part of Zaporizhzhia Oblast and in the Kupiansk area on the eastern bank of the Oskil River, whilst Ukraine has consolidated its positions in the centre of the town on its western bank.

Russian air attacks

On 24 March, the Russians carried out another massive air strike on Ukraine. Preliminary data suggests that it affected 11 regions (including the capital, Kyiv), and further power cuts occurred in the Kharkiv, Kherson, Odesa, Poltava, Sumy and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. As a result of two waves of attacks on Zaporizhzhia, significant damage was reportedly caused to one industrial facility, and a petrol station was also destroyed. One person was killed and five were injured. The Moldovan authorities reported that the Russian attack severed the power grid connection with Romania. According to the Ukrainian Air Force Command (UAFC), by 8:00 a.m. Kyiv time, the Russians had deployed 392 unmanned aerial vehicles, including 250 'Shahed' kamikaze drones, and 34 missiles (after this time, Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro, among others, were attacked). Ukraine reportedly neutralised 365 drones and 25 missiles, including all the cruise missiles used by Russia.

The Russians continued their concentrated attacks on Odesa and Odesa oblast. The main target was port infrastructure, damage to which was reported on 20, 22 and 23 March. In the first of these attacks, Russian drones also struck two ships flying the flags of Barbados and Palau, moored in Chornomorsk. According to Deputy Prime Minister Oleksiy Kuleba, since the start of this year, Russian drones have struck ports in Odesa Oblast as many as 180 times, compared to 150 times throughout the whole of last year. On 18 March, a gas compressor station north of Odesa was damaged; on 22 March, railway facilities; and on 23 March, transport and energy infrastructure, resulting in part of the regional capital being left without electricity.

Strikes by enemy drones led, among other things, to a blackout in Chernihiv. As a result of a strike on a substation in Nizhyn on 21 March, 430,000 customers were left without power, including everyone in the regional capital. Slavutych in Kyiv Oblast was similarly affected, as were parts of Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia following attacks on local substations. Zaporizhzhia's energy infrastructure was also damaged on 19 March, leaving 40,000 customers in the city without electricity. On the same day, strikes on substations, resulting in temporary power cuts, were also reported in the Mykolaiv and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts. On 22 March, a substation in the Kyiv suburb of Brovary was damaged, cutting off power to parts of Kyiv and Kyiv Oblast.

In border and frontline regions, further railway infrastructure facilities were attacked. In Sumy Oblast, a railway station was damaged (18 March) and a locomotive depot (21 March) in Trostyanets, as well as a station in Kyrykivka (18 March). Russian drones also struck a railway station in Bakhmach in the Chernihiv Oblast (18 March), railway infrastructure facilities in the Kirovohrad Oblast (19 and 23 March; in the first of these attacks, a substation controlling train traffic in Sharivka was hit) and in Kryvyi Rih (23 March). Russian drones also struck Kharkiv (18 and 19 March) and Dnipro (23 March).

On 18 March, Russian drones attacked targets in western Ukraine. A substation in Novovolynsk, near the Polish border, was damaged, resulting in 30,000 consumers being temporarily cut off from electricity and water supplies. In Lviv, meanwhile, the building of the Main Directorate of the Security Service of Ukraine in Lviv Oblast was seriously damaged. **On 20 March, gas extraction and processing facilities in the Poltava and Sumy oblasts were attacked.** Naftogaz reported that, as a result of the damage, gas processing plants had suspended operations (according to unofficial reports, this concerns Kachanivske in Sumy Oblast).

According to Ukrainian sources, between 17 and 23 March, Russian forces did not use any ballistic or cruise missiles in their attacks, marking the first such prolonged pause in their use. The extent to which this was dictated by a desire to conserve resources and prepare for another massive air strike remains an open question, as opposed to it being driven by the lack of need to use missiles, which are far more expensive than drones. In a combined attack on the night of 24 March, however, the Russians used a relatively small number of missiles – 34. According to the UAFC, from the evening of 17 March to the morning of 24 March (taking into account preliminary data from the massive attack), Russia deployed a total of 1,372 unmanned aerial vehicles, including 800 'Shaheds', of which Ukraine managed to neutralise 1,244.

Western support for Ukraine

On 17 March, during a visit to the UK, **President Volodymyr Zelensky and Prime Minister Keir Starmer signed a Declaration on enhanced industrial cooperation in the field of security and defence.** The document aims to increase cooperation between the two countries in the development and production of unmanned systems, artificial intelligence, training, and the sharing of battlefield experience with Britain.

On 18 March, during Zelensky's visit to Spain, **Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced that in 2026 his country plans to allocate €1 billion in aid to Ukraine** – via the SAFE mechanism.

On the same day, the Intelligence Online website reported that **Ukraine wishes to acquire Mirage 2000-5EDA fighter jets withdrawn from service by Qatar in exchange for support from Ukrainian specialists in countering unmanned aerial vehicles and the supply of interceptor drones.** This information has not yet been confirmed. Qatar has 12 of these aircraft at its disposal.

On 19 March, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy announced that it had temporarily simplified the rules on arms exports to Ukraine. The simplification involves allowing exports to be registered up to 30 days after the date of the first delivery. The regulations will remain in force until 15 September 2026.

On 21 March, an AEGIR combat unmanned surface vessel, manufactured by the American company Sierra Nevada Corporation, was found on the Turkish Black Sea coast. The Turkish side assumes that it had been used by Ukraine. The US has not yet specified which naval systems it is supplying to Ukraine.

The annual report by the Office of the Inspector General to the US Congress **revealed that, of the \$32.3 billion contracted since 2022 under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) by the end of 2025, military equipment and armaments worth a total of \$11.1 billion had been transferred to Kyiv.**

Russian operations against Ukraine

On 18 March, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) announced that it had uncovered a Russian information and psychological operation targeting the Hungarian minority in Zakarpattia. This involved agents of the Russian services posing as members of “nationalist-patriotic groups” and officers of the Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, and making telephone calls to representatives of the Hungarian community. During these conversations, the Russian agents allegedly demanded that people leave Ukraine and threatened to use violence. **On 23 March, the SBU announced that it had identified Zoltan Andre, an officer of the Hungarian military intelligence service, who was allegedly leading a network of agents operating in Transcarpathia.** Its members were said to be gathering

information on the region's military security, local socio-political sentiments, and the possible reaction of residents to a potential incursion by Hungarian troops.

On 18 March, the SBU reported the arrest in Dnipro of a woman who was allegedly preparing a terrorist attack in the city centre. Acting on the orders of the Russian intelligence services, she had constructed an improvised explosive device which she was to deliver to a specified location. The detonation would have been triggered remotely via a mobile phone. The suspect, a drug addict, was recruited via a Telegram channel with the promise of "easy money". Two 16-year-old residents of Poltava were recruited in the same way; they were preparing an attack on soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), as reported by the SBU on 23 March. According to investigators, the minors, acting on the orders of the Russian services, were preparing an improvised explosive device to be planted under a military vehicle.

Also on 18 March, the SBU reported the arrest of a resident of Kharkiv Oblast who was allegedly gathering data needed to prepare an air strike on one of Ukraine's largest thermal power stations. A day later, it announced the arrest in Kharkiv Oblast of a soldier from a sub-unit of the Armed Forces' Unmanned Systems Forces, who was allegedly passing on information to Russia and Belarus regarding the movement patterns, types and numbers of unmanned aerial vehicles used by the Defence Forces on the north-eastern border. On the same day, the SBU announced that it had referred to court materials concerning three individuals accused of passing on information to the Russians regarding the deployment and activities of the Defence Forces in the Lviv and Poltava oblasts. They were gathering data on the bases and movements of Ukrainian troops. The accused face up to 12 years' imprisonment and the confiscation of property.



Ukrainian operations against Russia

On the night of 23 March, Ukrainian forces carried out one of the largest drone attacks on Russia, deploying at least 526 unmanned aerial vehicles over a 24-hour period (starting from 22 March) – the Russian Ministry of Defence claims it neutralised this many. At least 70 of them struck Leningrad Oblast, where **facilities at Transneft's largest oil terminal in Primorsk were hit**. Satellite images confirmed the destruction of four fuel tanks. According to Reuters, the attack caused ports in Primorsk and Ust-Luga to suspend operations for several hours. According to the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, on 23 March the Bashneft-Ufaneftekhim refinery in Bashkortostan was also hit, and two days earlier – the refinery in Saratov. Fires broke out at both sites, and in Saratov one of the processing units and a fuel tank were reportedly damaged, forcing a temporary suspension of operations. On 21 March, Ukrainian drones also attacked the Tolyattikauchuk and KuibyshevAzot chemical plants in Samara Oblast, and on 19 March, Nevinnomyssk Azot in Stavropol Krai, most likely unsuccessfully.

On 18 and 19 March, the Ukrainians continued their massive drone strikes on occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Krai, including the cities of Krasnodar, Sevastopol and Simferopol. According to the Ukrainian Navy's Air Defence Command, on 19 March, the Granit company in Sevastopol, which repairs and maintains air defence systems, was hit, and on 20 March, a

metallurgical plant in Alchevsk in occupied Luhansk Oblast was struck. The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine also reported that on 18 March, Ukrainian drones damaged the infrastructure of the Aviastar aircraft plant in Ulyanovsk, which manufactures transport aircraft, and on 24 March, a Bastion missile system launcher in occupied Crimea.

On 17 March, Sergei Shoigu, Secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council, stated that Ukrainian long-range drones now pose a threat to the entire territory of Russia and that “no Russian region can feel safe”. He reported that in 2025, the number of Ukrainian air strikes on infrastructure in Russia had increased almost fourfold, exceeding 23,000. He identified military-industrial facilities, energy infrastructure, chemical plants, oil and gas fields, and the transport network – including major railway lines and federal roads – as the most vulnerable. In his view, taking these elements out of action could cause significant economic losses and disrupt the supply chains supporting Russian military operations.

Russia's military potential

On 23 March, a Russian Soyuz-2.1b launch vehicle carried the first 16 satellites of the future ‘Rassvet’ low Earth orbit (LEO) broadband communications network into space, planned as an alternative to the American Starlink system. The company responsible for the project, Bureau 1440, announced that hundreds of similar satellites would be launched into orbit in the coming years, enabling the creation of a fully-fledged system. “Rassvet” has been under development since 2020 as an initiative of one of Russia’s largest mobile operators, MegaFon (which established Biuro 1440 specifically for this purpose). In May 2025, it received support from Roscosmos. The launch of its own LEO system would provide significant support for Russia’s military operations, particularly following the loss of access to the Starlink system. Assuming the initiative is successful, however, this support will only become possible by around 2030, similar to the completion of the European IRIS² system. In both cases, the constellation will, at least initially, comprise several hundred satellites, whereas SpaceX, which operates Starlink, already has over 10,000 in orbit, and the French company Eutelsat OneWeb – which offers a significantly narrower range of services – has 650.

On 19 March, the Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, General Oleksandr Syrskyi, stated that Russia plans to recruit 409,000 soldiers in 2026. This figure is comparable to the scale of recruitment in 2024 and 2025, although last year Ukrainian sources initially reported a lower recruitment target of around 343,000 soldiers, which was significantly exceeded. **The authorities of two Russian oblasts – Samara and Astrakhan – announced on 20 February and 20 March respectively that they were increasing one-off payments from municipal budgets to those signing contracts with the Russian Armed Forces by a further 500,000 roubles (\$6,000).** Together with funds from the federal budget, contributions from other local authorities and previous amounts from local budgets, these payments in both oblasts will total 2.6 million roubles (\$31,200). It is only a matter of time before one-off payments are increased in other regions as well. As recruitment in 2025 demonstrated, after the recruitment plan was fulfilled, some Russian entities decided to reduce the amount of their local contribution; however, this should not be expected before

October–November this year. Despite the financial problems faced by the Russian regions as a result of the war, a collapse of the system for financing the Russian army's personnel, established in 2023–2024, remains highly unlikely.

On 24 March, the Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service (FISU) reported that Russia is developing illegal methods of recruiting foreigners into the army. This primarily concerns migrants residing in Russia, for whom a contract with the Russian army is to be presented as the only way to avoid administrative reprisals and gain the prospect of legalising their stay. According to the FISU, data from the Russian Ministry of the Interior supports this: in 2024, over 157,000 foreigners who had violated migration laws were forcibly expelled from Russia, representing a 45% year-on-year increase. In 2025, this figure fell to 72,000.

Ukraine's military potential

On 21 March, the Ukrainian edition of Deutsche Welle, citing sources in Ukraine's General Staff of the Armed Forces, military intelligence and the National Guard, reported that around 20,000 foreigners are currently fighting on the Ukrainian side. According to these estimates, they account for around 2% of the total number of Defence Forces personnel. The largest group is said to consist of volunteers from Colombia.

The war and the internal situation in Ukraine

On 17 March, Ukraine's State Bureau of Investigation announced that it had dismantled an illegal arms and ammunition trafficking ring organised by five soldiers serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. According to investigators, they were removing weapons, explosives and ammunition from their units' depots and then selling them via an 'online shop' they had set up. The scheme was reportedly generating over 1.5 million hryvnias in monthly profits and, during a raid on 11 March in Odesa, a consignment of weapons worth \$17,000 was seized, including machine guns, grenades, ammunition and assault rifles.

The situation in the occupied territories

According to the Russian daily "Vedomosti", **Russia plans to resettle nearly 114,000 of its own citizens to the occupied territories** of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts **of Ukraine by 2045.** According to the documents presented, the population in these areas is set to increase by 67,000 as part of general plans and by a further 46,700 thanks to spatial development projects.

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