

## As Putin orders martial law in annexed regions, Ukrainian offensive continues, prompting large evacuations in Kherson region



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks and troop locations as of today.

At a meeting of Russia’s 30-member Security Council yesterday, President Vladimir Putin told the members he had signed an Executive Order introducing martial law in the four Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia – recently annexed by Russia. The decree was forwarded to the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Federal Assembly, which approved it unanimously a few hours later. The Order took effect at midnight and establishes military control of the four regions. Putin announced he had also signed an Executive Order giving additional powers to the heads of all Russian regions so they can take measures “to ensure the safety of people, the security and counterterrorism protection of critical infrastructure facilities, maintain public order, enhance the stability of the economy and industry, as well as launch and increase the manufacturing of products necessary for the special military operation.”

The words “special military operation” refer, of course, to the operation Putin announced on February 24, three days after recognizing the independence of the “people’s republics” created in the wake of the 2014 annexation of Crimea by pro-Russian separatists in portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine and signing treaties of friendship, cooperation and assistance with both. The purpose of the operation, he said, was “to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine.... It is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force.” Obviously, the plan has changed; the two regions of the Donbas as well as the other two regions are now part of the Russian Federation.

As Russia imposed martial law in the four annexed regions and granted additional powers to regional authorities throughout Russia to protect critical infrastructure and increase the production of goods needed for the war, Ukrainian forces continued to claw back territory both in the northeast and the south. Over the past week, Ukraine has taken back some territory east of the Oskil River in the thin slice of eastern Kharkiv region that is still held by Russian forces and continues to slowly push eastward in the northernmost portions of Donetsk region. And in Kherson region in the south, Ukrainian forces have taken back a significant amount of the territory west of the Dnipro River taken by the Russian forces and, indeed, are threatening to take back the city of Kherson, which had a pre-war population of more than 180,000 and was, in early March, the first major city to be taken by Russia.

Last week, Volodymyr Saldo, a former mayor of Kherson and the head of the Russian administration in the region, asked Moscow for assistance in organizing the evacuation of civilians from the region to Russia and Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin said the government would organize the departure of residents from Kherson. Yesterday, Saldo confirmed that all Russian administrative departments had been moved from Kherson, which is on the west bank of the Dnipro River, to the east bank and announced that 50,000 to 60,000 civilians would be evacuated from four towns on the west side of the river over six days in an “organized, gradual displacement.” He said 5,000 had already been moved in the last two days. Kirill Stremousov, Saldo’s deputy, warning that Ukrainian troops would be attacking in the near future, wrote a message on Telegram “No one is going to retreat, but we also want to save your life. Please move as quickly as possible to the left [i.e., east] bank. Please take my words seriously. I’m talking about evacuating as quickly as possible.” Today he said on Telegram that 15,000 have been evacuated thus far. General Sergey Surovikin, who earlier this month was appointed overall commander of Russian troops in Ukraine, said, warning of a Ukrainian attack on Kherson in the near future, “As a whole, the situation in the special military operation zone can be described as tense. The situation in this area is difficult. The enemy is deliberately striking infrastructure and residential buildings in Kherson.” Saying there is a “direct threat to the lives of the inhabitants,” he urged residents to evacuate to Russian-controlled areas. The evacuations of civilians, as well as the resupplying of the Russian forces currently west of the river and, quite possibly, the retreat of those forces in the near future, are, of course, greatly complicated by the fact that the Ukrainian forces have damaged or destroyed all of the bridges crossing the river.

Putin instituted martial law yesterday in the four regions he annexed two weeks ago. But instituting martial law doesn’t alter the fact that Russia is losing the battle on the ground for one of those regions and, indeed, may soon lose the city of Kherson.

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