

## Russian offensive continues in the Donbas as speculation continues about Zaluzhnyi



UK Defence Intelligence update on battlefield situation in Ukraine as of Friday.

Ukraine’s much-anticipated counteroffensive against the Russian forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine began in early June last year. But over the following weeks and months, the Ukrainian forces made limited progress and by autumn the counteroffensive had, in the view of many observers, stalled and become literally a counter-offensive – a defensive operation against the continuing Russian offensive at a number of points along the 1200-kilometer “contact line” between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. The defensive operation continued last week, as it has for the past several months, and it continues this week.

The latest British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation as of last Friday (above) indicates, as it has for some time, that the Russian forces continue to attack in the direction of Kupiansk in Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine, toward the area around the largely destroyed city of Bakhmut, and toward Avdiivka, a small city about ten miles north of Donetsk, the capital city of the region. But the Russian forces also continue to attack at other points along the “contact line” – most notably, toward Lyman in northern Donetsk region, which if taken would provide a steppingstone toward the large industrial cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk; toward Marinka, a small city about ten miles to the west of Donetsk; toward the area controlled by the Ukrainian forces south of Orikhiv; and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine where the Ukrainian forces have established a beachhead on the east bank of the Dniro River.

The extent to which the Ukrainian counteroffensive has become a defensive operation against the continuing Russian offensive operations is perhaps best illustrated in the updates issued each morning by the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces on the combat engagements the previous day. Combining those daily updates in week-by-week totals reveals the number of Russian attacks each week on specific points along the contact line. Thus, last week, from Sunday through Saturday, the General Staff reported a total of 453 Russian attacks – 36 in the direction of Kupiansk, 38 in the direction of Lyman, 25 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut, 187 toward Avdiivka, 80 toward Marinka, 10 toward Shakhtarsk, another small city near Donetsk city, 18 toward several villages and small towns south of Orikhiv, and 59 toward the Ukraine forces just east of Kherson city in southern Ukraine. As it does every week, the General Staff reported that all of the attacks were repelled. Over the past four weeks, from Sunday, Jan. 7 through last Saturday, the General Staff reported a total of 1967 Russian attacks on those points – 177 in the direction of Kupiansk, 259 in the direction of Lyman, 135 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut, 705 toward Avdiivka, 374 toward Marinka, 37 toward Shakhtarsk, 95 toward the villages and small towns south of Orikhiv, and 185 in Kherson region east of the Dnipro.

Judging from the number of Russian attacks both last week and over the last four weeks, there can be little doubt that the priority for the Russian forces at this point in the war is to take most, if not all, of Donetsk region. Southeastern Ukraine, meaning the territory south of Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia region and the territory in Kherson region, is obviously important; after all, Russia annexed both regions (along with Luhansk and Donetsk regions) in October 2022 and no doubt envisions creating a “land bridge” to Crimea in that area. But while the Russians launched 280 attacks in those two regions over the past four weeks, they launched a total of almost 1500 attacks toward Avdiivka (705), Marinka (374), Lyman (259) and the Bakhmut area (135), which suggests that the highest priority for the Russian forces remains, as it has been from the outset, holding Donetsk city, securing the region around it, and taking most, if not all, of the Donbas.

Indeed, in a recent Intelligence Update, British Defence Intelligence reported that “Russia continues its offensive across multiple axes, in line with its strategic objective to capture the Donbas.... The assessed main priority for Russian forces is the city of Avdiivka. The Russians are mounting a three-pronged attack to encircle the city from the south and north, and also fighting on the outskirts of the eastern quarter of Avdiivka city itself.... Russian forces are reportedly attempting to bypass Ukrainian fortifications by entering the city edges via service tunnels; this is a method of infiltration they have been attempting since October 2023. Ukrainian counterattacks are holding Russian forces from progressing further within the city. As the main supply route remains intact, and Ukrainian forces make local counterattacks, Avdiivka is likely to remain in Ukrainian control over the coming weeks.”

While the Russian offensive continues in eastern Ukraine, speculation has continued about the status of Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed

Forces of Ukraine. It was Zaluzhnyi who famously told *The Economist* last fall that “Just like in the first world war we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate,” a characterization President Zelenskyy disputed. And in the winter, the military proposed lowering the age for the draft from 27 to 25 to get an additional 500,000 soldiers, a proposal Zelenskyy rejected. Ever since, there has been speculation about Zaluzhnyi’s status and, specifically, whether, and if so when, he would be replaced as Commander-in-Chief. Last week, Zaluzhnyi revealed that Zelenskyy had asked for his resignation on Jan. 29 but he had refused to resign. In an interview with Italian broadcaster RAI TV released Sunday, Zelenskyy confirmed he was thinking about replacing Zaluzhnyi to ensure that the military is led by someone who “is convinced of victory.” “A reset, a new beginning, is necessary,” Zelenskyy said. “It is not about a single person but about the direction of the country’s leadership. I’m thinking about this replacement, but you can’t say here we replaced a single person. When we talk about this, I mean a replacement of a series of state leaders, not just in a single sector like the military. If we want to win, we must all push in the same direction, convinced of victory.”

Commenting yesterday on Telegram, Vitali Klitschko, the Mayor of Kyiv, expressed his support for Gen. Zaluzhnyi, as he had last fall in the wake of the General’s comment about a stalemate in the counteroffensive: “It was largely thanks to Zaluzhnyi that Ukrainians truly believed in our Armed Forces, which are the most trusted today. Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi went through many difficult moments as a soldier during the war. Only he knows how many there were, actually.” Commenting on Zaluzhnyi’s possible resignation or removal, Klitschko said, “Politics can outweigh common sense and the interests of the state... Because today, when Ukraine is fighting for its survival, the main thing is the combat capability and coherence of the army and the unity of society. Is this what the hinted changes are aimed at? The society is not sure. And this should be taken into account. And finally, stop political intrigues and internal struggle. The only thing you need to fight for today is the victory of Ukraine in the war against the Russian aggression.” He’s right.

David R. Cameron  
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