

**As Russian offensive continues in east, EU approves new funds for Ukrainian military. And Putin is reelected – again.**



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



Russian Election Commission projection of results with 99.75% of vote counted.

Last week the Russian forces continued their offensive operations against the Ukrainian forces at a number of points along the “contact line” between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. As Friday’s British Defense Intelligence map of the battlefield situation, above, indicates, the Russian forces continued to attack in the direction of Kupiansk in Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine, toward the area around Bakhmut, toward the area around Avdiivka, a small city north of

Donetsk city from which the Ukrainians withdrew last month, and toward the area south of Orikhiv held by the Ukrainian forces. But, as in recent weeks, the Russian forces continued to attack at other points as well – toward Lyman in northern Donetsk region, in the area to the west and south of Marinka, a small city about ten miles west of Donetsk city that the Russians took in late December, and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine where the Ukrainian forces have established a beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River.

Based on the daily updates on the previous day's combat engagements issued each morning by the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, last week the Russian forces conducted a total of 488 attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending those points along the contact line – 11 in the direction of Kupiansk, 67 in the direction of Lyman, 34 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut, 136 toward the area to the west of Avdiivka, 177 toward the area to the west and south of Marinka, 47 toward several villages and small towns held by Ukrainian forces south of Orikhiv, and 16 against the Ukrainian beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River east of Kherson city. Clearly, judging from the frequency of attacks, the highest priority for the Russian forces in eastern Ukraine last week was, as it has been for several weeks, extending their control of the territory to the west of Avdiivka and to the west and southwest of Marinka – and, more broadly, to the area to the west of Donetsk city. The Russian forces in that area will presumably continue to attack in those directions this week as well as toward the Bakhmut area and Lyman, both of which are close to the important cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in the northern portion of Donetsk region.

Meanwhile, as the Russian ground offensive continues in eastern Ukraine, last week the EU, concerned that the Ukrainian forces are running out of ammunition – most notably, artillery shells, gave preliminary approval to the first installment of its revised European Peace Facility (EPF). The EPF is a seven-year €12 billion off-budget instrument that was created in March 2021 to support EU actions related to its Common Foreign and Security Policy – specifically, actions designed to prevent conflicts, build peace, and strengthen international security. In February 2022, days after Putin began Russia's "special military operation," the EU provided Ukraine €4.5 billion in military assistance through the EPF. In October 2022, it created the European Union Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) within the EPF and last May it provided Ukraine with €1 billion for ammunition. The EPF was replenished with €2 billion last March and another €3.5 billion last July. But with its funds nearly depleted, last July Josep Borrell, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called for the creation of a new four-year €20 billion fund within the EPF that would provide Ukraine up to €5 billion a year for four years for weapons, ammunition, and military assistance.

In November, the EU defense ministers considered the Borrell proposal. Not surprisingly, given the opposition of the Hungarian minister as well as the

concerns, if not outright opposition, of some of the other defense ministers about the amount involved, the ministers tabled the proposal. As one participant put it, “Germany has had a lot of questions...and rightfully so. We’re talking about a lot of money.” An unnamed EU official said, “I’m not going to declare it dead at this point yet. But of course, improvements can always be made.” Nevertheless, the defense ministers did at least underscore the need for the EU to fulfill its commitment last May to deliver one million rounds of ammunition to Ukraine. And a few days later, they agreed to provide Ukraine an additional €200 million in EPF assistance for military training.

Having been tabled by the defense ministers in November, the Borrell proposal wasn’t on the agenda of the European Council’s December meeting for a vote. Nevertheless, in their Conclusions from that meeting, the leaders said, “The EU and its Member States will continue to address Ukraine’s pressing military and defense needs. In particular, the European Council insists on the importance of timely, predictable, and sustainable military support for Ukraine, notably through the European Peace Facility and the EU Military Assistance Mission, as well as through direct bilateral assistance by Member States...The European Council invites the Council to intensify work on the reform of the European Peace Facility and the further increase of its financing, building on the proposal of the High Representative... Following the report by the High Representative, the European Council discussed the future security commitments to Ukraine. It invites the High Representative and Member States to take work forward in the Council. The European Council will remain seized of the matter.”

The leaders of the member states met again on Feb. 1, after which they reaffirmed in their conclusions the EU’s “unwavering commitment to continue to provide strong political, financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and its people for as long as it takes. The European Council reiterates the determination of the EU and Member States to continue providing timely, predictable, and sustainable military support to Ukraine, notably through the European Peace Facility (EPF) and the EU Military Assistance Mission, as well as through direct bilateral assistance by Member States, in line with Ukraine’s needs. It will keep the issue under review. The European Council reviewed work in the Council on military support for Ukraine under the European Peace Facility and the proposed increase of its overall financial ceiling. It invites the Council to reach agreement by early March 2024 to amend Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/509 [which authorized the EPF] on the basis of the proposal of the High Representative for a Ukraine Assistance Fund and the proposed key modalities, taking into account suggestions by the Member States.”

On Wednesday at a meeting in Brussels, the ambassadors of the 27 EU member states agreed, after a dispute between some of the member states that had gone on for several months, to revise and update the EPF and, as part of that process, to provide Ukraine with €5 billion for military assistance. The EPF provides reimbursements to member states which provide military assistance to other countries. France in particular had insisted that such reimbursements be used to

purchase replacement equipment from European producers while some of the other member states argued that might make it more difficult to get weapons to Ukraine quickly. Germany, which is by far the EU's largest supplier of military assistance to Ukraine, meanwhile had insisted that such donations be taken into account in determining how much the member states should contribute to the EPF. Eventually, a compromise was found that would allow some flexibility on "buy European" rules when "buying European" would delay getting needed equipment to Ukraine and would take into account a portion of the bilateral aid when calculating the contributions of the member states to the EPF. A further complication involved Hungary's refusal to allow payouts from the EPF that would finance military assistance for Ukraine. Under the agreement reached on Wednesday, Hungary's contributions will be used to fund military assistance to other countries rather than to Ukraine.

After the decision, Borrell posted on X: "The message is clear: we will support Ukraine with whatever it takes to prevail." The EU has not yet agreed on the full €20 billion-over-four-years plan put forward by Borrell last summer. Nevertheless, €5 billion is a good start. The European Council will meet again later this week on Thursday and Friday. Presumably, the Council of Ministers, which will earlier this week, will formally approve distribution of the first €5 billion installment from the new Ukraine Assistance Fund in the revised European Peace Facility prior to the leaders' meeting.

In the meantime, the Russians went to the polls on Friday, Saturday, and yesterday to elect Putin to another six-year term as President. There were three other candidates on the ballot – Nikolay Kharitonov, a Communist Party member of the Duma; Leonid Slutsky, the leader of the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and a member of the Duma; and Vladislav Davankov, a member of the New People party and a Deputy Chair of the Duma. Those living in the Ukrainian regions that Russia unilaterally annexed and formally incorporated into the Russian Federation – Crimea in 2014 and Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions in 2022 – also voted in the election.

The result of the election was, of course, a foregone conclusion, the only question being the size of Putin's majority and the turnout. Soon after the polls closed Sunday evening, an exit poll issued by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM) gave Putin 87.6 percent of the vote, with the remaining 12.2 percent spread evenly among the other three candidates. As the projection in the Russian Electoral Commission of the latest results (above) indicates, with 99.75 percent of the votes counted, Putin received 87.3 percent of the vote, with the remainder divided among the other three candidates. The turnout was reported to be 77.4 percent. In the 2018 presidential election, Putin received 77.5 percent of the vote and the turnout was 67.5 percent. Given the substantial increase in both his share of the vote and the turnout, Putin will no doubt interpret the result as an unambiguous endorsement of his presidency and, in particular, his conduct of the war against Ukraine.

And lest anyone in Europe or elsewhere imagine that, after having been elected president five times – first in 2000 and then in 2004 when the term was four years, then, after serving as Prime Minister in 2008-12 under President Dmitry Medvedev who in 2008 extended the term to six years, in 2012 and 2018, and then, because of a 2020 constitutional amendment that allows all citizens to serve two terms as president after ratification of the amendment, again this year – this was Putin’s last election, the 2020 amendment means he’ll be eligible to run for yet another six-year term in 2030.

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March 18, 2024