

As Russian offensive continues in eastern Ukraine, both sides add more troops through conscription



UK Defence Intelligence latest update on battlefield situation in Ukraine.

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 was the situation on March 22, the date of the latest British Defense Intelligence map of the battlefield situation, above, last week 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 Ukrainian forces withdrew last month after a prolonged siege, and toward the area south of Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia region recently taken by 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 Novopavlivka sector to the west and south of Marinka, a small city west of Donetsk city the Russians took in December, and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine where the Ukrainian forces 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 433 attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending those points along the contact line – 3 in the direction of Kupiansk compared with 20 the week before; 69 in the direction of Lyman compared with 64 the week before; 47 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut compared with 62 the week before; 84 toward the area west of Avdiivka and northwest of Donetsk city compared with 77 the week before; 183 toward the area south of Marinka and southwest of Donetsk

city compared with 201 the week before; 35 toward several villages and small towns south of Orikhiv compared with 51 the week before; and 12 against the Ukrainian beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River compared with 14 the week before.

Why the numbers of Russian attacks toward the target areas last week varied, and why they varied also from the numbers of attacks toward each target area in the previous week, was no doubt the result of several factors, including the availability of troops and equipment for the Russian forces operating in each area, their calculation of the vulnerability of the Ukrainian forces in each area, and of course weather conditions. But the varying numbers of attacks no doubt also reflect Russian priorities. The fact that 62 percent of the attacks in eastern Ukraine last week were directed at the areas west of Avdiivka and south of Marinka, which are, respectively, northwest and southwest of Donetsk city, compared with 57 percent the previous week, suggests the priority for the Russian forces in eastern Ukraine last week was, as it has been for the past several weeks, securing the area to the northwest, west, and southwest of Donetsk city, the capital city of the region (which, from Russia's point of view, is now an integral part of the Russian Federation). And that, coupled with the fact that the Russians launched no attacks after Tuesday in the direction of Kupiansk and fewer attacks last week than the week before in the area south of Orikhiv and against the Ukrainian beachhead on the Dnipro, while they continued to attack in the direction of Lyman and the area near Bakhmut, underscores the fact that the priority for the Russian forces in eastern Ukraine is to take the area to the north, west and south of Donetsk city and the central and western portion Donetsk region.

As the war in eastern Ukraine grinds on, and both sides lose troops each day, both sides find themselves needing more troops and, inevitably, expanding their conscription efforts. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense estimates that from Feb. 24, 2022, when Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine began, until today, the Russian forces have had 444,370 "combat losses" – that is, troops either killed or seriously wounded and removed from battle. Russia conducts two conscriptions a year, one in the spring and another in the fall. Last spring, 147,000 Russians aged 18 to 27 were called up for military service and last fall another 120,000 were called up. Last August, a law was passed raising the upper draft age limit from 27 to 30 as of Jan. 1, 2024, and on Sunday it was announced that President Putin had signed a decree ordering the draft of 150,000 between the ages of 18 and 30 who are not in the reserves and are eligible for conscription between yesterday and July 15, 2024. Another round of conscription will follow in the fall.

Ukraine likewise has experienced substantial losses in the war. On Feb. 25, President Zelenskyy stated that "31,000 Ukrainian military personnel have been killed in this war." But some believe more Ukrainian troops than that have been killed. The UN, for example, has said that 4,400 Ukrainians were killed from 2014, when the conflict in the Donbas with pro-Russian separatists supported by

Russian troops began, through 2021 – that is, prior to the start of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022. The organization UALosses, which gathers information from local notices, families, and friends, reports that 4,798 Ukrainian soldiers were killed between 2014 and 2021 and 44,712 have been killed since Feb. 24, 2022, resulting in a total of 49,510 killed, 60 percent higher than Zelenskyy’s figure. The chair of the Verkhovna Rada’s Defense Committee has said the General Staff reported that 7,000-8,000 soldiers are missing in action, some of whom may be prisoners of war but others of whom may have been killed.

But while the numbers of casualties vary, there can be no doubt that Ukraine has suffered significant losses and needs more troops. Last May, the Verkhovna Rada passed legislation lowering the draft age from 27 to 25. The bill had been on Zelenskyy’s desk since then but he had said he would sign it only if there was a strong argument that it was needed. In December, he said the military, headed at the time by Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, had proposed adding 500,000 to the military. Zelenskyy called on the military to provide a detailed plan about how the additional troops would be deployed and raised an obvious financial issue as well: “The mobilization of an additional 450,000 to 500,000 people will cost Ukraine 500 billion hryvnia [almost \$13 billion] and I would like to know where the money will come from. Considering that it takes six Ukrainian working civilians paying taxes to pay the salary of one soldier, I would need to get 3 million more working people somewhere to be able to pay for the additional troops.”

Last Friday, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, who replaced Zaluzhnyi as Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces – Zaluzhnyi retired and is now Ukraine’s ambassador to the UK, gave a lengthy interview in which he was asked about Zaluzhnyi’s proposal to increase the military by 500,000. He said, “Following the revision of our internal resources and clarification of the combat composition of the Armed Forces, this figure was significantly reduced. We expect that we will have enough people capable of defending their motherland. I am talking not only about the mobilized, but also about volunteer figures.... We are currently reviewing the strength and number of individual non-combat units based on an audit of their activities. This enabled us to send thousands of service members to combat units.” Syrskyi’s words were no doubt welcome to Zelenskyy and, perhaps for that reason, yesterday Zelenskyy signed the legislation that had been sitting on his desk since last May to lower the draft age from 27 to 25. He also signed a second bill yesterday that required those who, because they were judged to be “partially fit,” had been given a waiver from some types of military activity including combat to undergo another medical assessment. And he signed a third bill yesterday approving creation of an online database of those eligible for military service that will enable call-up notices to be delivered online to all draft-eligible persons, including those who have been displaced or have otherwise relocated. The new measures, as well as others now under consideration in the

Rada, reflect a fundamental reality – that Ukraine needs more troops, many more troops, if it is to withstand not only the current offensive operations the Russian forces are conducting in eastern Ukraine but the subsequent offensive operations those forces, supplemented by the next wave of Russian conscripts, will undertake later this spring and in the summer and fall.

David R. Cameron

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