

As Russian attacks in the east continue, leaders of the European Political Community & the EU discuss the U.S. election and Putin congratulates Trump & says he's ready to have discussions.



As Friday's British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine, above, indicates, the war in eastern Ukraine continued last week, as it has for several months, with the Russian forces attacking toward the city of Kupiansk in Kharkiv region; toward the center of the city of Chasiv Yar about 10 kilometers west of Bakhmut, which the Russians took last year after a prolonged siege; and toward Pokrovsk, a city with a pre-war population of 60,000 about 60 kilometers west of Avdiivka, which the Russians took in February. But as the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported last week in its daily updates on the war, the Russian forces also continued to attack at a number of other points – toward Kharkiv from territory they hold north of the city; toward Lyman about 30 kilometers southeast of Iziurm; toward Kramatorsk about 25 kilometers northwest of Chasiv Yar; toward Toretsk about 20 kilometers south of Chasiv Yar; toward Kurakhove about 25 kilometers west of Donetsk city; toward Vremivka about 30 kilometers southwest of Kurakhove; in the Orikhiv sector southeast of Zaporizhzhia; and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine where the Ukrainian forces hold territory on the east bank of the Dnipro River. And they continued to attack the Ukrainian forces holding a portion of Russia's Kursk region just north of Sumy – and did so with some of the 12,000 North Korean soldiers sent to Russia after the Russian Parliament ratified the Russia-North Korea defense treaty signed in June.

In its daily updates covering last week from Sunday through Saturday, the General Staff reported a total of 1,163 Russian attacks at various points along the contact line between the forces. In the previous week, the General Staff reported a total of 1,086 Russian attacks. As has been the case for the last several weeks, the Russian forces launched many more attacks last week against the Ukrainian forces defending Kurakhove (390) and Pokrovsk (220) than against the forces defending any of the other cities in eastern Ukraine. But the forces defending some of those other cities were nevertheless the targets of a large number of Russian attacks; last week, the Russian forces conducted 103 attacks toward Lyman, 92 attacks toward Kupiansk, and 62 attacks toward Vremivka. Nevertheless, last week Pokrovsk and Kurakhove were clearly, as they have been for the past several weeks, the two most important targets for the Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine. On one day last week, the Russian forces launched 93 attacks against Kurakhove, and on another day last week they launched 84 attacks against the Ukrainian forces holding that city.

The same pattern continues this week. On Sunday, the Russian forces launched 160 attacks against the cities of eastern Ukraine, on Monday they launched 187 attacks, and yesterday they launched 162 attacks. Of those 509 attacks, 152 were directed toward Kurakhove and 113 were directed toward Pokrovsk. Those two cities are clearly the most important targets of the Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, and for good reason: Both are located at junctions of rail lines and major highways and, if taken, would provide pathways to other important cities still held by Ukrainian forces. Taking Pokrovsk would open a pathway northward to Kostiantynivka, Kramatorsk, and Sloviansk to the north. And taking Kurakhove, about 30 kilometers south of Pokrovsk, would open a pathway toward Zaporizhzhia.

Last Wednesday, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy spoke by telephone with Donald Trump and congratulated him on his election victory. He subsequently said, “I had an excellent call with President Trump and congratulated him on his historic landslide victory. His tremendous campaign made the result possible.” He also said it was too early to predict what Trump would do but emphasized that a strong America would be good for Europe in general and Ukraine in particular: “Of course, we cannot yet know what his actions will be. But we do hope that America will become stronger. This is the kind of America that Europe needs. And a strong Europe is what America needs.”

On Thursday, at a meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, Russian President Putin congratulated Donald Trump on his victory and raised the possibility of discussions with him at some point. When asked what Trump is like, Putin answered: “You know, you can regard him in any way you like. After all, at the outset – during his first presidential term – everyone said that he was mainly a businessman and that he did not understand much about politics, that he could make mistakes. But, first, I can tell you: his behavior when he faced an assassination attempt really impressed me. He turned out to be a courageous man. And it was not just the raised hand and the call to fight for their shared ideals. It was not just that, although, of course, this was more of a reflex. A man

shows himself in extraordinary conditions – this is where a man shows himself. And he showed himself, in my opinion, in the right way: he showed his courage, as a man. As for politics during his first term in office, I do not know whether what I say reaches him, but still I will say it now. I am saying this absolutely sincerely: I have the impression that he was hounded from all sides, that they would not let him do anything. He was afraid to take a step to the left, to the right, to say an extra word. I do not know what will happen now, I have no idea: this is his last term after all, so it is up to him to make his choices. But what has been said publicly so far is mostly.... I do not want to comment now on what was said during the presidential campaign, I think it was said consciously trying to win votes, but whatever. And what has been said in terms of trying to restore relations with Russia, to help end the Ukrainian crisis, in my opinion at least deserves attention. Availing myself of this opportunity, I would like to congratulate him on his election as President of the United States of America. I have already said that we will work with any head of state who has the trust of the American people. We will live up to this pledge.” When asked, “And if he calls you before the inauguration and says, ‘Vladimir, let us meet’,” Putin said, “You know, I do not think it would be shameful for me to call him. I do not do this because there was a time when the leaders of Western countries have been calling me almost every week, and then suddenly they stopped. If they do not want to do it, so be it. As you can see, we are alive and well, and are developing, moving ahead. If someone of them wants to resume contacts, I have always said and I want to say again: we have nothing against it. We are ready to resume our contacts and have discussions.” Asked again, “Does this mean that you are ready to have discussions with Trump?” Putin said, “We are ready, of course.”

Trump has said he would end the war in 24 hours. He hasn’t said how, but the presumption is he would let Russia keep the territory in eastern Ukraine it now holds – which may well explain why Russia is so focused on taking Pokrovsk, Kurakhove, and the other targeted cities in eastern Ukraine despite its heavy combat losses. (The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense estimates that as of today Russia’s total combat losses – meaning those killed or wounded and removed from battle since the war began on Feb. 24, 2022 – have reached approximately 714,380 personnel.) Sen. Marco Rubio, who is expected to be named Secretary of State in the Trump administration, has said the war is a stalemate and needs to be brought to a conclusion.

As the Russian attacks on Pokrovsk, Kurakhove and other cities in eastern Ukraine continued last week, on Thursday the leaders of the member states of the European Political Community met in Budapest. The EPC, founded in 2022 after Russia launched its war against Ukraine, consists of the 27 member states of the EU and 20 other states including, among others, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Turkiye and the UK. It aims to “foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest and strengthen the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent.” According to the summary of the meeting provided by the EU, which arranged the EPC meeting, “the leaders discussed Europe’s security challenges, in the context of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and the ongoing escalation in the Middle East, irregular

migration and issues related to economic security and connectivity in terms of energy, transport, IT, and global trade. EU-US relations was also a topic of discussion among leaders, in light of the recent US elections.” In the margins of the meeting, European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, French President Emmanuel Macron, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk met with recently-re-elected President Maia Sandu of Moldova and commended her leadership and commitment to keeping Moldova on the European path and discussed ways to enhance cooperation to support the country’s economy and reform efforts.

The leaders of the 27 EU member states also held an informal meeting of the European Council in Budapest on Friday. In his remarks after the informal meeting, President Michel said, “Yesterday evening, we had an exchange of views on the transatlantic alliance and the relationship with the U.S. following the election of Donald Trump. It was an occasion to congratulate him. Some of us spoke with him yesterday or in recent days. We are ready to strengthen the transatlantic ties; we are ready to cooperate and coordinate in various fields with the U.S. I see three important elements for this coordination and cooperation. First: bilateral relations – trade and investment. This is a challenge. We want to strengthen our economic base, and I am confident that we will work hard in that field. Second: security and geopolitical challenges. Ukraine and the Middle East require more dialogue and more efforts to make sure that we defend our common interest. Yesterday, in a phone call with Donald Trump, we discussed Ukraine and the Middle East, and in the days to come, in the weeks to come, we will continue to work with the U.S. to identify how we can defend our common values and principles. Many times, in the European Council, we have affirmed our support for Ukraine in various fields. I am absolutely convinced that supporting Ukraine is not only a way to defend our values, but also a way to send a signal to the rest of the world that the international rules-based order is essential, and that we want to defend the UN Charter and the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. If we do not, this makes all of us more vulnerable and puts the world at risk.... Finally, a word about defence and security. I remember five years ago, when some of us started to talk about European sovereignty and strategic autonomy, it was not the mainstream across the EU, but today I can see that there is more and more support for the idea that we have to strengthen European defense readiness and our defense capabilities. We need to cooperate much more. NATO is a fundamental pillar, but there is a European responsibility in that field. We also discussed how we can reinforce the industrial base in that field, because if we want to be credible in the field of European defence in the future, we also have to support more development of our industrial base.”

As if Ukraine and the Europeans supporting it don’t have enough to worry about in the wake of Donald Trump’s victory, last Wednesday German Chancellor Olaf Scholz fired Finance Minister Christian Lindner after Lindner, the leader of the Free Democratic Party, proposed sending Ukraine long-range Taurus cruise missiles instead of €3 billion in financial aid, claiming that he couldn’t approve the aid given the German financial

situation. The Taurus missiles have a range of up to 500 kilometers, significantly greater than other Western long-range missiles; Ukraine has repeatedly asked for Taurus missiles; and it clearly needs them. Lindner said the €3 billion wouldn't make a difference given the volume of aid Ukraine is getting from the West, but the Taurus missiles would make a big difference. Yesterday, the SPD and CDU agreed there will be a vote of confidence in the government in the Bundestag on Dec. 16, after which, assuming the government loses the vote, there will be an election on Feb. 23, after which a new government will take office. Whether Ukraine will receive the Taurus cruise missiles remains to be seen.

Yesterday, after speaking with Trump on Monday, Finnish President Alexander Stubb said Trump's intentions are clear: "We in Europe and the rest of the world need to understand that Donald Trump is very serious about getting a peace deal sooner rather than later. There's a window of opportunity for these negotiations between the election and inauguration day."

David R. Cameron
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