

## As the attacks continue against Pokrovsk & other cities in east, the EU renews its sanctions on Russia



As Friday's British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine, above, indicates, last week the Russian forces continued to attack toward Kupiansk in Kharkiv region, toward the area around Chasiv Yar, west of Bakhmut, which they took in 2023 after a prolonged siege, and toward Pokrovsk, west of Avdiivka which they took last February. But as the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported in its daily updates, the Russian forces also continued last week to attack toward Kharkiv from territory they hold north of the city, toward Lyman about 30 kilometers southeast of Izyum, toward Kramatorsk about 25 kilometers northwest of Chasiv Yar, toward Toretsk about 20 kilometers south of Chasiv Yar, toward Vremivka about 50 kilometers south of Pokrovsk as well as in the Orikhiv area 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. The Russian forces also continued, with the assistance of North Korean troops, to attack the Ukrainian forces that, since their August incursion, hold a portion of Russia's Kursk region just to the north of Sumy.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported a total of 1070 Russian attacks at various points along the contact line between the forces in eastern Ukraine in the seven days last week from Sunday, Jan. 26, through Saturday, Feb. 1. In the previous seven days, the Russian forces launched a total of 1047 attacks. The total number of Russian attacks each day last week ranged from 110 to 193 and averaged about 150 attacks a day.

As in previous weeks, the Russian attacks were focused especially on the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk, a city that had a pre-war population of about 60,000 and is an important transit hub on the E50 highway that links Donetsk city, about 60 kilometers to the southeast, with Pavlohrad and Dnipro to the west. Dnipro, the fourth-largest city in Ukraine, had a pre-war population of nearly one million. If taken, Pokrovsk would not only open a pathway toward Dnipro but would open a pathway northward in Donetsk region toward the cities of Kostiantynivka, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk that are now held by Ukrainian forces. Over the seven days last week, the Russian forces conducted a total of 495 attacks, almost half of all the attacks last week in eastern Ukraine, against the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk and the surrounding area. On five of those seven days, the Russian forces conducted more than 70 attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending the city and the surrounding area, and on two of those days the Russian forces conducted more than 80 attacks.

But Pokrovsk and its surrounding area weren't the only targets of repeated attacks by the Russian forces last week. The Russian forces attacked the Ukrainian forces defending Lyman and the nearby area 98 times last week, they attacked the forces defending Toretsk 87 times last week, they attacked the forces defending Kramatorsk 71 times last week, and they attacked those defending Kupiansk 67 times last week. They also attacked the Ukrainian forces that, since their August incursion, have held part of Russia's Kersh region northeast of Sumy 69 times last week. Nevertheless, the fact that the Russian forces attacked the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk and the nearby area 495 times last week, and launched more than 70 attacks on five of the seven days last week, makes it very clear that, while all of the areas the Russian forces attacked in eastern Ukraine are priorities, their highest priority clearly remains, as it has been for the past several months, taking Pokrovsk.

While the war continued in eastern Ukraine as it has for the past several months, there was an important development last week in regard to the EU's sanctions on Russia. Last July, the Council of the European Union, consisting of the foreign ministers of the 27 member states, renewed the EU's restrictive measures – i.e., sanctions – on Russia in response to its continuing actions in Ukraine for a further six months until Jan. 31, 2025. The sanctions, first introduced in 2014 after Russia unilaterally annexed Crimea, were significantly increased after Russia began its “special military operation” in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022. They consist of a broad spectrum of sectoral measures, including restrictions on trade, finance, energy, technology, industrial, dual-use and luxury goods. They also prohibit the import or transfer of seaborne crude oil and certain petroleum products from Russia to the EU; de-SWIFT a number of Russian financial institutions (SWIFT is the acronym for the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, a messaging network that allows financial institutions to securely exchange information about financial transactions); freeze all Russian financial assets, including those belonging to Russia's Central Bank, in EU financial institutions; and suspend the broadcasting activities and licenses of several Kremlin-backed

disinformation outlets in the EU. In addition, specific measures enable the EU to counter efforts to circumvent the sanctions.

On Dec. 16, 2024, the Council of the European Union adopted a 15<sup>th</sup> package of restrictive measures with the objective of “further limiting Russia’s ability to wage its illegal, unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine.” The sanctions apply to 54 individuals and 30 entities “responsible for actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.” Among the individuals added to the list of those sanctioned were the members of a Russian military unit responsible for striking a children’s hospital in Kyiv, senior managers in leading companies in the energy sector, and individuals responsible for the deportation of children. Among the entities, the sanctions primarily targeted Russian defense companies and shipping companies responsible for the transportation of crude oil and oil products, as well as a chemical plant and a civil Russian airline that provides logistical support for the Russian military. The Council also added 52 vessels from third countries that are part of Russia’s shadow fleet and banned them from access to EU ports and services related to maritime transport, bringing the total number of such vessels that are sanctioned to 79. The Council also added 32 new entities to the list of those directly supporting Russia’s military in its war against Ukraine.

Meeting three days later, the heads of state or government of the 27 member states of the EU, meeting as the European Council, reiterated their “resolute condemnation of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, which constitutes a manifest violation of the UN Charter,” reaffirmed their “continued support for Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally-recognized borders” and reconfirmed the EU’s “unwavering commitment to providing continued political, financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and its people for as long as it takes and as intensely as needed. Russia must not prevail.” The leaders said, “efforts to further limit Russia’s ability to wage war must continue. In this context, the European Council welcomes the adoption of the 15<sup>th</sup> package of sanctions against Russia, including measures against the ‘shadow fleet’.” It also reiterates its call for the full and effective enforcement of sanctions and for further means and measure to counter their circumvention, including through third countries. The EU remains ready to step up pressure on Russia, including by adopting further sanctions.”

A meeting of the EU Council of Ministers was scheduled for Jan. 27, 2025 to formally approve the new package of sanctions. Renewal of the sanctions required approval by all of the member states and the obvious question, going into last Monday’s meeting, was whether Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán would veto their renewal. Prior to the meeting, he had made it clear, after Ukraine announced earlier in January that it wouldn’t renew an agreement that allowed Russian oil and gas to flow through its territory, that he would block approval of the new package if the EU didn’t persuade Ukraine to allow oil and gas to flow through the pipelines to Hungary. He said he was putting the “handbrake” on renewal of the sanctions and claimed Hungary had lost

billions since Ukraine stopped the flow of gas from Russia: “If the Ukrainians want help, for example, to sanction the Russians, then let them reopen the gas pipeline and let them allow the Central European countries, include Hungary, to import the gas we need through Ukraine.”

But to the surprise of many, at last Monday’s meeting of the Council of Ministers, Hungary didn’t veto renewal of the EU’s new package of sanctions and it was unanimously approved. As the news of the EU’s renewal of its sanctions on Russia became known, there was widespread speculation that Orbán had been influenced by the fact that, while President Trump, who he regards as a friend, had said nothing about the war in his inauguration address, the next day he had said at a news conference that he would be speaking with President Putin “very soon” and, the day after that, had said in a Truth Social post, “I’m going to do Russia, whose Economy is failing, and President Putin, a very big FAVOR. Settle now and STOP this ridiculous War! IT’S ONLY GOING TO GET WORSE. If we don’t make a ‘deal’, and soon, I have no other choice but to put high levels of Taxes, Tariffs, and Sanctions on anything being sold by Russia to the United States, and various other participating countries. Let’s get this war, which never would have started if I were President, over with! We can do it the easy way, or the hard way – and the easy way is always better. It’s time to ‘MAKE A DEAL’.”

Perhaps those comments – in particular, Trump’s suggestion that he might put “high levels of Taxes, Tariffs, and Sanctions on anything being sold by Russia to the U.S.” – softened Orbán’s opposition to renewal of the EU sanctions on Russia. But the more likely reason is that Orbán used the threat of a veto as a means of persuading the EU to intervene with Ukraine and allow Russian gas to resume flowing through the pipelines to eastern Europe. The supply of Russian gas through Ukraine stopped on Jan. 1 after the expiration of the transit contract and Slovakia and Hungary had been urging the EU to step in and persuade Ukraine to allow continuation of the supply of Russian gas. But that would of course require Ukraine to negotiate a new transit contract with the Russian supplier and President Zelenskyy refused to do that, saying, “We will not let the Russians profit.” Instead, he offered to assist in arranging a possible alternative – supplying Hungary and the other European countries dependent on Russian gas with gas from Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, at last Monday’s meeting, Hungary went along with the other EU member states and approved renewal of the package of sanctions on Russia. It did so, apparently, because the EU agreed to continue talks with Ukraine on allowing the resumption of the supply of Russian gas for Hungary and other states in eastern Europe. In a statement read out to the EU ambassadors prior to last Monday’s meeting, the European Commission said, “The Commission is ready to continue discussions with Ukraine on the supply to Europe through the gas pipeline system in Ukraine in line with Ukraine’s international obligations. The Commission will approach Ukraine to request assurances

regarding the maintenance of oil pipeline transfers to the EU. The Commission is ready to associate Hungary in the process along with Slovakia.”

Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said he was satisfied with the Commission's assurances: "The European Commission committed itself to the protection of the natural gas and oil pipelines leading to member states of the European Union." But whether Russia will agree to allow its gas to flow to Ukraine, and onward to the EU, remains to be seen.

David R. Cameron  
February 3, 2025