

Ukraine military briefing

Military briefing: Russia 'overwhelms' Ukrainian forces on eastern front



Moscow is taking advantage of Kyiv's redeployment into Kursk region

Christopher Miller in Pokrovsk 7 HOURS AGO

On a recent sweltering afternoon, the screens of the Ukrainian National Guard's 15th Brigade command centre lit up with alarming footage from the eastern front: the radar was showing a dozen highly-destructive Russian glide bombs barrelling towards Ukrainian positions.

Another screen displayed hacked feeds from Russian suicide drones zeroing in on Ukrainian tanks. And a third, coming from a Ukrainian reconnaissance drone, was tracking enemy motorcycles and dune buggies headed towards Kyiv's forces.

"You can see how they overwhelm us," grumbled a commander known by the call sign "Phoenix".

The Russian offensive gained steam in August, as Ukraine diverted thousands of its most battle-hardened troops to carry out a surprise [incursion into Russia's Kursk region](#). Ukraine had hoped its audacious operation would force the Kremlin to redeploy resources from Donetsk, but that has not happened.

Instead, Russian forces captured several towns, moving within 8km of Pokrovsk and just 4km of Myrnohrad and unleashing the might of the Russian army on both logistical hubs in an attempt to take them before the end of the year.

Some commanders and many soldiers see this as the cost of the Kursk offensive and a poor trade-off.

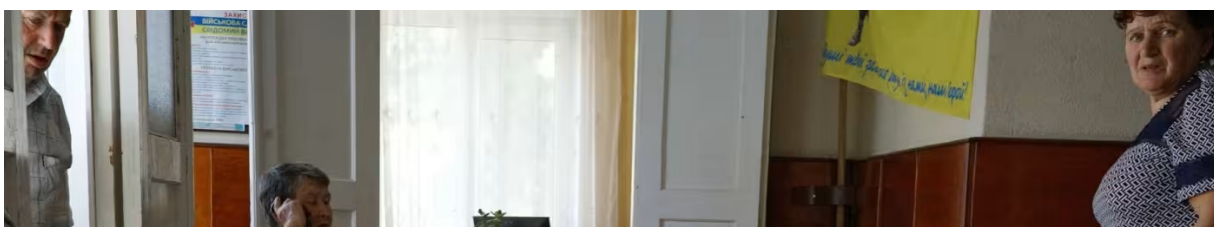
"Kursk was a good idea, it exposed Russia as being weaker than many people believed," said a commander of a Ukrainian ground forces unit. "But we are paying the price of it with [more of our own land]."

With a combined pre-war population of 100,000, Pokrovsk and Myrnohrad are vital for Ukraine's defence of the eastern front. If they fall, it would endanger the larger cities of Kostyantynivka, Druzhkivka, Kramatorsk and Slovyansk and significantly boost Russia's strategic position in the region, Ukrainian commanders warned.

Capturing these two hubs would also hurt Ukrainian morale, which had just received a boost from the [Kursk incursion](#), said commanders and soldiers.

Russia's main strategy has remained the same since the start of its [full-scale invasion](#) in 2022: overpowering Ukrainian forces with sheer might and resource advantages, Phoenix and commanders from four other Ukrainian brigades told the Financial Times this month. They all complained their soldiers were sometimes outnumbered at a ratio of 1:8 and that for every shell fired, Russians were firing 10 or more.

But the Russian forces had also adapted, the commanders said, learning from earlier mistakes and avoiding large assaults with tanks and armoured vehicles. Their new tactics have led to recent successes in Ukraine's Donetsk region, forcing Ukrainian troops to retreat and bringing Moscow closer to its goal of controlling the entire area.





A Russian bomb killed two people and injured five others in Kostyantynopil, Donetsk, near the frontline on September 11 © Christopher Miller/FT

The signs of Russia's destructive advance were evident around Pokrovsk, where freezer vans transporting fallen soldiers passed signs urging drivers to "pray for our troops". Trucks carried damaged western-provided weaponry to the rear for repairs and excavators were digging fresh trenches in unharvested sunflower fields.

Access to Pokrovsk has become increasingly dangerous, with Russian rockets destroying overpasses and forcing evacuees on to perilous dirt roads. Inside the city, the atmosphere was eerily desolate, interrupted by the sound of nearby artillery duels. Military vehicles roamed the streets and most buildings bore the scars of aerial attacks. Missiles have also knocked out electricity and water supplies.

In August, authorities ordered the evacuation of families and children from Pokrovsk and Myrnohrad. But 18,000 residents remain in the two cities, largely on their own after trains carrying people west were cancelled this month because of security concerns. The closest railway station is 100km west, in Pavlohrad.





A Ukrainian soldier observes an area in front of a building destroyed by a Russian air strike, while patrolling in Myrnohrad, Ukraine © Evgeniy Maloletka/AP

The locals who refused to leave did so either out of stubbornness or for fear of starting over in a new place. A small group known as *zhduny*, or “the waiting ones”, supports the Russian war effort, believing life will improve under their rule. Ukrainian commanders have encountered *zhduny* recently in nearby Selydove, where Russian forces are advancing. The Russians evacuated some of them to occupied Mariupol, said a Ukrainian commander.

Mykhailo Temper, a battery commander in the 21st battalion of Ukraine’s Separate Presidential Brigade who has been in the region since April, said that Russian tactics shifted in midsummer. They are now employing faster, more mobile units and have adopted strategies previously used by Wagner, the paramilitary group led by the late Russian warlord Yevgeny Prigozhin — who was killed in a plane crash last year after leading a revolt against Moscow’s top brass.

“[Vladimir] Putin destroyed Wagner, but he took the most effective parts of it,” Temper said. The Russian army, he added, “learned lessons and experiences from Wagner and are fighting like them”.

“Boulevardier”, a drone operator in Temper’s battalion, said the new Russian tactic of using smaller infantry units to attack from several directions at once had made it harder for him to target troops.

At the same time, Ukrainians could do little about Russian attack helicopters and jets carrying glide bombs, soldiers said.

“We have no air defences here,” said a deputy commander in Ukraine’s 72nd mechanised brigade fighting 70km south of Pokrovsk in Vuhledar, a town at risk of being encircled by Russian troops.

The attempt to take Vuhledar has been costly for Moscow’s forces, with thousands of troops killed and hundreds of tanks and armoured vehicles destroyed in nearly two years of battle.

But with his own troops “exhausted”, the deputy commander said, the Russians could

stand a better chance at taking it in the coming weeks. “We have had zero rotations since the full-scale invasion” began in 2022, he said. Typically, that would happen every one to two months. “We need a break.”

Delays in [western arms](#) deliveries are also a factor in the worsening situation for Ukrainian forces, commanders said. But the commanders laid the blame with Kyiv’s military leadership for moving too slowly to build defensive lines and then constructing ineffective trenches and firing positions.

“Where are our fortifications?” the deputy commander asked. “There were no real defensive lines” in February when the Russians first managed a breakthrough, taking the town of Avdiivka.

What had been built since was inadequate, he said: in open fields, far from tree lines, and sometimes behind hilltops — which makes it hard to spot the enemy.

“This is bullshit,” he said in frustration. “We can’t get infantry to trenches without any cover.” The troops rely on shrubbery, which hardly conceals their movements, leading to “senseless deaths”.



Ukrainian soldiers fire a M101A1 howitzer towards Russian troops at a front line near Pokrovsk, Donetsk region, Ukraine © Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty/Serhii Nuzhnenko/Reuters

In recent weeks, Ukraine has deployed reinforcements to bolster its troops around Pokrovsk and stepped up construction of fortifications.

But Russia also changed tactics, slowing its advance towards Pokrovsk and

attempting to flank Ukrainian positions. Now it is focusing also on territory around Vuhledar and Kurakhove, another stronghold facing intense Russian onslaughts to the south.

That approach has expanded the battlefield and further complicated Ukraine's thin defences, commanders said.

"We see many cauldrons are forming," said Temper, referring to pockets of Ukrainian troops in the process of being encircled and cut off, forcing them to withdraw. A map of the battlefield updated daily by [Deep State shows several](#) have begun to form.

Yuriy, a commander in the 68th Jaeger Brigade whose troops fought but ultimately failed to defend the town of Novohrodivka, said the latest battles are "very intense".

"We have had a lot of losses," he said, rubbing his eyes. "There are more losses than before."

While declining to provide casualty numbers, he described his unit as in shambles, with wounded soldiers sent to hospitals and psychiatric wards, while the fit ones have been redeployed to different units.

Yuriy also described Russian chemical weapons attacks on his troops, including one in April when soldiers jumped out of their trenches to breathe fresh air, only to be shot. "Our guys choked on it and panicked," he said. The US Department of State confirmed in May that Russia used chloropicrin against Ukrainian forces, in violation of international law.

While Ukraine's casualties were climbing, Yuriy said Russia's were higher. But despite hundreds of Moscow's soldiers dying every day, they were quickly replaced by more recruits, Yuriy and other commanders said.

"It is unimaginable," Yuriy said. "How long can they keep this up?"

The head of a drone reconnaissance unit feared the answer could be several years and predicted the "total destruction and likely occupation" of Pokrovsk within two to three months.

"Realistically," he said, "Pokrovsk will be like Bakhmut," the city flattened by Russian bombs and occupied by Wagner last year.

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