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# **UKRAINIAN OFFENSIVE INTO KURSK: A BLUNDER OR GENIUS**

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# Ukraine's Gamble in Kursk

Early on in August of 2024, the Ukrainians surprised the world by leading an attack directly into the Russian territory of Kursk-Oblast. This was the first time in the war that Ukraine had directly entered Russian territory as an offensive with intentions to hold onto said territory. The Ukrainian offensive was marked by swift progress that captured anywhere from 28 to 92 settlements and exposed the undermanned Russian borders that were vulnerable to attacks such as this.<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian officials claimed that their troops had captured some 1,300 sq. km, but other estimates put it around 1,150 sq. km, while the Russians claim to have only lost 480 sq. km. However, data from Deep State maps show only 823 sq. km being under Ukrainian control, while another 416 sq. km has an “unknown” status as it has not been confirmed to be under Ukrainian control.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that at the time of writing, the Ukrainians lost 40% of the areas they had captured during the initial offensive that lasted from August 6<sup>th</sup> till around the 22<sup>nd</sup> when the front started stabilising.<sup>3</sup>

This offensive is a landmark move coming into the picture 2 years into the ongoing war, around a time when we expect attrition to have taken its toll and reduce offensives. The Russians and the Ukrainians have been locked in endless fighting in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine. The Russians have been stuck in a slow war of attrition against the dug-in and well-entrenched Ukrainian defenders. The Russians have been slowly but surely pushing the Ukrainians back, aided by the supply shortage that Ukraine faces, especially with artillery ammunition being in short supply. This steady progress has been costly in terms of human lives for both sides; however, the Russians possess more conscripts and reserves that can be thrown into the fight, which isn't a luxury that Ukraine has for itself. The Russians also possess a native arms industry that can keep

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<sup>1</sup> Ukraine losing ground in Kursk, says military source. (2024, November 24). euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/24/ukraine-has-reportedly-lost-40-of-land-it-had-seized-in-russias-kursk-region>

<sup>2</sup> DeepStateMAP | Map of the war in Ukraine. (n.d.). DeepStateMap. <https://deepstatemap.live/en#11/51.2660224/34.5286560>

<sup>3</sup> Ukraine losing ground in Kursk, says military source. (2024, November 24). euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/24/ukraine-has-reportedly-lost-40-of-land-it-had-seized-in-russias-kursk-region>

producing heavy equipment and artillery shells, which is further substituted by the purchase of ammunition from North Korea, China, and Iran.<sup>4</sup>

## Ukraine's Objectives in Kursk

The Ukrainian offensive aimed to achieve four main objectives.<sup>5</sup> Their primary aim was to distract the Russians from their offensives in the South by forcing them to divert some of their veteran and specialised units away from offensive operations in the South to counter Ukrainians in Kursk. This aim was furthered after the fall of Ukraine's fortified city of Avdiivka in October of 2023, and the road to Pokrovsk became slightly easier; Pokrovsk is an important logistic hub for the Ukrainians. The Russians also attempted to stretch the Ukrainian lines thinner than they already were by surprise attacking the city of Kharkiv, forcing a Ukrainian break in their lines to allow for the capture of Pokrovsk (at the time of writing, Pokrovsk still stands, but Russian forces are less than 10 km from it).<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, Kursk Oblast houses several railroad junctions and acts as a logistics hub for the Russian armies that threaten Kharkiv and North-Eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainians hoped to overwhelm the lightly defended region and take control of some of these hubs to then force a withdrawal of some or most Russian units near Kharkiv.

Third, the Kursk region houses key infrastructure, such as one of Russia's biggest nuclear power plants that provides electricity for Kursk and a few of its neighbouring regions. Gaining control of the power plant would severely hamper Russia's ability to generate electricity during its bitterly cold winters and perhaps turn the populous against the war. In addition to the powerplant, the region is home to Russia's Sudzha gas terminal. Gaining control over this would mean increased Western pressure on Russia, as the gas that has been flowing through Ukraine into Hungary,

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<sup>4</sup> Cooperation between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and potential future threats to America. (n.d.). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/cooperation-between-china-iran-north-korea-and-russia-current-and-potential-future-threats-to-america?lang=en>

<sup>5</sup> Ukraine claims more advances into Russia's Kursk region with prisoners taken. (2024, August 14). PBS News. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/ukraine-claims-more-advances-into-russias-kursk-region-with-prisoners-taken>

<sup>6</sup> DeepStateMAP | Map of the war in Ukraine. (n.d.). DeepStateMap. <https://deepstatemap.live/en#11/51.2660224/34.5286560>

Austria, Italy, etc., will come to an end, and a key revenue stream for Russia will come to a halt. It will also allow Ukraine to cause heavy infrastructure damage or gain a better deal at the negotiating table when peace finally comes.

Lastly, the Ukrainians saw this vital region sparsely defended, only defended by Russian FSB, conscripts, and border guards, none of whom were trained in the style of fighting that was to take place in Kursk led by some of Ukraine's best combat units.<sup>7</sup>

## Units involved in Kursk

Ukrainian forces amassed and struck out into Russia; the offensive, which lasted around 20 days, starting on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, saw the Ukrainians make swift progress and end up almost 55 km inside of Kursk. These units involved the Ukrainian 82<sup>nd</sup> Air Assault Brigade, 61st Mechanised Brigade, and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Mechanised Brigade, starting with only 400 troops, 11 tanks, and 20 armoured vehicles, quickly growing to 2000 soldiers and artillery by the end of August the 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>8</sup> By the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, most of the steam from the initial push was lost due to the severe lack of Ukrainian artillery ammunition, resulting in practically undisputed Russian artillery dominance in the front. The gamble that Russia would divert its troops from the South also paid off, and almost 20,000 soldiers were diverted to Kursk at the time of writing; reports suggest upwards of 50,000 Russian soldiers, which involves multiple VDV airborne units and the Elite Marine infantry fighting against some 20,000 well-entrenched Ukrainians.<sup>9</sup>

The Ukrainians have also been on the back foot since late September-early October, with heavy Russian bombardment and counter-offensives slowly pushing them back and steadily gaining lost ground. The Ukrainians have an ally in the pro-Ukrainian partisans present within Russia. The Ukrainians also attempted landings at Tendrovskaya Kosa, a sandbar at Kherson Oblast, which

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<sup>7</sup> How Ukraine successfully invaded Russia: The battle for Kursk | Battle board | Daily mail [Video]. (2024, November 29). YouTube. <https://youtu.be/r55Sf9vFU1k?si=p0VntfNh4chJC6sw>

<sup>8</sup> Ukrainian military incursion into Kursk Oblast likely to force immediate pause in Russian offensive operations in the Donbas. (2024, August 16). Default. <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-and-national-security-analysis/post/ukrainian-military-incursion-into-kursk-oblast-likely-to-force-immediate-pause-in-russian-offensive-operations-in-the-donbas>

<sup>9</sup> Kizilov, Y. (2024, November 27). Ukrainian Special Operations Forces capture several dozen Russian marines in Russia's Kursk Oblast – video. Ukrainska Pravda. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/11/27/7486612/>

proved to be a failure.<sup>10</sup> The Russians have released videos of Russian artillery having destroyed multiple combat vehicles, such as Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs), and even a few tanks, including Western tanks such as the Leopard 2A4. The Russians have received additional reinforcement with the arrival of nearly 10,000 Elite North Korean soldiers (their combat prowess yet to be proven). The arrival of these troops meant that fewer Russian units needed to be diverted to fight the Ukrainians.

This doesn't mean that Ukrainians are only suffering losses; according to Ukrainian officials, the Ukrainians have killed, captured, or wounded some 20,000 Russian troops. They have also released videos of Leopard tanks engaging Russian units and a few tank-on-tank duels. The Ukrainian drone operators continued to destroy and take out several Russian equipment and troops. In contrast, Russian drone operators have hit back, coordinating artillery strikes and disabling multiple M113 and JLTV APCs.<sup>11</sup>

## Future of the Offensive

The initial offensive saw massive success, with Russian units being caught off guard and Ukrainians using their specialised and elite units well to break through and form encirclement. This, however, has been changing slowly with the Ukrainian artillery low on ammo and mounting casualties.<sup>12</sup> The Ukrainians risk losing their Elite airborne units along with equipment that will be harder for them to replace as the newly elected Trump administration wants a conclusion to the war, which could result in a drastic reduction of outgoing aid to Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Russia has been making it harder for Ukraine to get assistance from its best main allies in the Baltic and Poland by forcing their governments to divert their attention with sabotage operations and military pressure using the

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<sup>10</sup> How Ukraine successfully invaded Russia: The battle for Kursk | Battle board | Daily mail [Video]. (2024, November 29). YouTube. <https://youtu.be/r55Sf9vFU1k?si=p0VntfNh4chJC6sw>

<sup>11</sup> Attack on Europe: Documenting Ukrainian equipment losses during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (2022, February 24). Oryx. <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-ukrainian.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ahlawat, S. (2024, November 18). EU delivers nearly 1 million artillery shells to Ukraine; Why it's advantage Russia despite NATO's \$1.47T budget. EURASIAN TIMES. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/eu-delivers-nearly-1-million-artillery-shells/>

<sup>13</sup> Trump policies: Seven things he says he will do as president. (2024, November 6). BBC Breaking News, World News, US News, Sports, Business, Innovation, Climate, Culture, Travel, Video & Audio. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cev90d7wkk0o>

enclave of Kaliningrad.<sup>14,15</sup> The Russians attempted to use refugees as weapons to distract Poland back in 2022, and this tactic continues to be used.<sup>16</sup>

Russians having deployed North Korean troops into Russia to fend off the Kursk offensive means that Western nations can decide to send in their troops to the defence of Ukraine. These ideas have already been put forward by the Polish and the Baltic leaders, two of Ukraine's biggest allies in the war. The Ukrainians and Russians already had a foreign legion, having foreign volunteers fighting for both sides in this conflict. However, this was voluntary, and their respective governments officially sent none of the individuals. This was the case for foreign fighters in this war until North Korean troops arrived in Ukraine.<sup>17</sup>

This offensive comes at a critical time when Ukraine had been and still has ongoing supply shortages. At the start of the war, both sides had been firing well over 1,00,000 artillery shells per month, but as Western reserves ran low and Western production fell well short of what was required, Ukraine quickly started reducing its artillery usage.<sup>18</sup> Russia has suffered the same crisis, but Russia has a homegrown weapons industry that can outproduce whatever Ukraine receives via the West.

The current number of shells fired is estimated to be 20,000 by the Russians and about 2,000 by the Ukrainians. This entire debacle shows how ill-prepared the current world is for long-lasting wars that continue to be dominated by artillery and overwhelming amounts of firepower. The ever-

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<sup>14</sup> Putin's fleet - Russian espionage in the Baltic Sea | DW documentary [Video]. (2024, October 22). YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Br3K93-z6PI?si=DEaE7x-LpNirzDD9Finland> investigating possible sabotage of Baltic gas pipeline. (2023, October 10). euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/10/10/baltic-gas-pipeline-leak-likely-caused-by-external-activity-says-finlands-president>

<sup>15</sup> How Russia is changing Baltic Sea borders [Video]. (2024, November 26). YouTube. <https://youtu.be/QDnMYztafl?si=nXzLOMdZiYh6OeyW>

<sup>16</sup> Poland: Tusk plans to suspend right to asylum – DW – 10/12/2024. (2024, October 12). dw.com. <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-tusk-plans-to-suspend-right-to-asylum/a-70478179>

<sup>17</sup> Pentagon says 10K North Korean troops in Kursk oblast. (2024, November 4). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3955757/pentagon-says-10k-north-korean-troops-in-kursk-oblast/>

<sup>18</sup> Ahlawat, S. (2024, November 18). EU delivers nearly 1 million artillery shells to Ukraine; Why it's advantage Russia despite NATO's \$1.47T budget. EURASIAN TIMES. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/eu-delivers-nearly-1-million-artillery-shells/>

increasing cost of production and the lack of storage present to produce and maintain artillery shells for war.<sup>19</sup>

The reports on Ukrainians having used cruise missiles to strike targets deep inside Russia from Kursk have resulted in Putin threatening to escalate the war to involve tactical nuclear strikes by recently passing a bill that pretty much made it impossible for Ukraine to strike Russian infrastructure using the recently acquired Western cruise missiles.<sup>20</sup>

The offensive and the current trajectory that it seems to be going in mean that the Ukrainian gamble might just end up in failure, as none of the secondary objectives have been achieved.<sup>21</sup> However, the result that would have been expected with the primary objective not fully coming true is that they have managed to redirect several elite Russian units from the South and the East and have also forced the Kremlin to further fortify the other border regions along Ukraine. Despite this success, the Russian offensives continue to stubbornly push the Ukrainians back inch by inch, reminiscent of World War 1 and its famed trench warfare. Each trench captured by the Russians is a morale boost, which comes at the cost of massive Russian casualties while being a major loss for the defenders. Russia can continue to replace its dead, but this isn't the same for the Ukrainians.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ukraine's artillery shell shortfall. (n.d.). Default. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/ukraine-s-artillery-shell-shortfall>

<sup>20</sup> Bluff and bluster: Why Putin revised Russia's nuclear doctrine. (2024, December 3). Building better security for wider Europe | European Leadership Network. <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/bluff-and-bluster-why-putin-revised-russias-nuclear-doctrine/>

<sup>21</sup> Zhmailo, D. (2024, October 29). What has Ukraine achieved in the Kursk offensive? The Moscow Times. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/10/29/what-has-ukraine-achieved-in-the-kursk-offensive-a86842>

<sup>22</sup> Is Ukraine running out of soldiers to fight Russia? (2024, October 24). The National Interest. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/ukraine-running-out-soldiers-fight-russia-213354>

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