



## Ucrania 2024. ¿Mejor una buena guerra que una mala paz?

### Resumen:

Este documento hace un balance de los recientes acontecimientos en los campos de batalla de Ucrania basados en información procedentes de fuentes abiertas. Se trata de un análisis fundamentalmente militar sobre la evolución de la guerra en el último año y de la posible evolución de un conflicto en el que el comportamiento de los combatientes, las decisiones políticas y las estrategias militares permiten vislumbrar en medio de «la niebla de la guerra» el rumbo que puede tomar en los próximos tiempos. Como ha puesto de manifiesto la incursión ucraniana en la región de Kursk de agosto de 2024, la guerra no está estancada, sino muy activa, y tanto Ucrania como Rusia tienen la capacidad de tomar decisiones que producen un impacto significativo en las realidades de los campos de batalla en cada momento y, consecuentemente, en el desenlace final. A medida que las líneas rojas van cayendo una tras otra, Ucrania camina peligrosamente hacia la guerra absoluta, libre de los efectos moderadores impuestos por la política y la sociedad y sin las restricciones prácticas del tiempo y el espacio. La decisión de acabar con todas las restricciones al empleo de la fuerza militar conlleva el riesgo de una escalada militar de consecuencias impredecibles. Mucho dependerá, más allá de los resultados militares, de las decisiones que se toman en Occidente y fundamentalmente de las que se tomarán en Washington después de las elecciones presidenciales, pero lo que parece claro es que, sin los hábitos moderadores de la diplomacia y la negociación, Ucrania va camino de la guerra total sumida en el pensamiento mágico de que, sin ellas, Rusia terminará por colapsar.

### Palabras clave:

Rusia, Ucrania, Guerra, Ofensiva, desgaste, escalada, negociación, restricciones, victoria.

### How to cite this document:

FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. *Ukraine 2024. Is a good war better than a bad peace?* IEEE Analysis Document 12/2025. [enlace web IEEE](#) and/or [link bie<sup>3</sup>](#) (accessed day/month/year)

## Crimea. A peninsula too far

In early 2023, the war situation appeared to favour Ukraine. The counter-offensives at Kherson and Kharkov had been a resounding success and many in the West were hopeful that Kyiv's troops would continue to advance and turn the tide of the war once and for all. Ukraine was winning.

Yet it soon became clear that victory would not be so easy. In May 2023, the Wagner Group succeeded in taking Bakhmut, a former Cossack outpost of little strategic importance, although at a very high cost. Bakhmut became a symbol of the struggle between two armies, where "pride, defiance and sheer stubbornness"<sup>1</sup> forced them to fight one of the bloodiest and most costly battles of the war. Although Russia eventually prevailed, it was a pyrrhic victory in a brutal battle of attrition that lasted nine months<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, both Russians and Ukrainians considered the battle worthwhile. The former because they had won and the Ukrainians because Bakhmut "limited Russia's capabilities in other areas and allowed Ukraine to prepare for further advances"<sup>3</sup>.

After a few months of delay due to bad weather and delayed Western arms deliveries, in early June 2023, Ukraine was in a position to resume the offensive in several directions against Russian-occupied territory. A new spring offensive, which some compared to the "D-Day"<sup>4</sup> Normandy landings in World War II, was over-enthusiastically thought to be a turning point in the course of the war, provided the Ukrainian armed forces were able to break through the front line and reach the Sea of Azov. If successful, the war would enter a decisive phase by splitting Russian forces in southern Ukraine in two, before launching a final assault on the Crimean peninsula.

Even if Ukraine was unable to expel all Russian forces from occupied Ukrainian territory, which many analysts considered unlikely<sup>5</sup>, an eventual Ukrainian victory would serve to weaken Russia's strategic position in the war, while ensuring that Ukraine would continue

---

<sup>1</sup> GIBBONS-NEFF, Thomas. "Why Bakhmut? It's a Question Older Than the Ukraine War.", *The New York Times*, 23 May 2023.

<sup>2</sup> GRYNSZPAN, Emmanuel; PIETRALUNGA, Cédric; D'ISTRIA, Thomas; AUBENAS, Florence (à Kiev); VITKINE, Benoît. "Guerre en Ukraine : la bataille sans fin de Bakhmut". *Le Monde*, 11 May 2023.

<sup>3</sup> KULLAB, Samya. "Why Ukraine is waging a brutal war of attrition against Russia over Bakhmut World", *Associated Press*, 21 May 2023.

<sup>4</sup> IGNATIUS, David. "D-Day dawns for Ukraine", *The Washington Post*, 8 June 2023.

<sup>5</sup> BARNES, Julian E.; ERLANGER, Steven. "As Ukraine Launches Counteroffensive, Definitions of "Success" Vary". *The New York Times*. 10 June 2023.

to receive military support and long-term security guarantees from the West<sup>6</sup>. This was highly important in view of the NATO summit to be held in Vilnius at the end of 2023, where Ukraine's future in the Atlantic Alliance would be discussed.

For the offensive, the Ukrainian high command planned to take advantage of the newly created units that had been receiving NATO military training as well as Western equipment, mainly M1 Abrams and Leopard 2 tanks, which had been gradually arriving in Ukraine<sup>7</sup>. By early August, after several months of delay, Ukraine had committed 150,000 troops to the offensive, with 50,000 to 60,000 soldiers ready to be employed as spearheads in twelve brigades equipped with modern Western weaponry<sup>8</sup>. Against them, the Russians had an estimated 300,000 troops<sup>9</sup>.

The Russians had not been idle during these months, and had taken advantage of the delays in the offensive to fortify occupied territories, mobilise and train their soldiers, and increase military industrial production<sup>10</sup>. From November 2022 onwards, its military engineers erected the most formidable defensive line known in Europe since the Second World War. This defensive line stretched 2000 km in length from the Belarusian border to the Dnieper delta, with particular emphasis on the Zaporizhzhia region where the Russian Command estimated that the Ukrainian army would strike the hardest. It consisted mainly of deep ditches, anti-tank dragon's teeth, trenches, artillery and firing positions set up to ambush vehicles, plus extensive minefields in the front line. This made the Russian defences virtually impassable<sup>11</sup>.

At the same time, the Russian General Staff reorganised its chain of command, making it much more horizontal and flexible, so that it could combine various units according to the mission and circumstances by placing them under a single command<sup>12</sup>. It also moved

---

<sup>6</sup> MILLER, Christopher; Hall, Ben; SCHWARTZ, Felicia. "Ukraine's counter-offensive: the war reaches a "decisive moment"". *Financial Times*. 9 June 2023.

<sup>7</sup> VAN BRUGEN, Isabel. "Ukraine Reveals When Counteroffensive Against Russia Will Begin". *Newsweek*. 10 June 2023.

<sup>8</sup> "No breakthrough yet in Ukraine's counteroffensive". *Politico*, August 2023.

<sup>9</sup> SABBAGH, Dan. "We will succeed: Zelensky says Ukraine ready to launch counteroffensive". *The Guardian*, 8 June 2023.

<sup>10</sup> MILLER, Christopher. "Military briefing: how Russia is fortifying its frontline for Ukraine's counteroffensive", *Financial Times*, 2 August 2023.

<sup>11</sup> JONES, Seth; PALMER, Alexander; BERMUDEZ Jr., Joseph. "Ukraine's Offensive Operations: Shifting the Offense-Defense Balance". Center for Strategic and International Studies. 13 June 2023.

<sup>12</sup> KONAEV, Margarita; DANIELS, Owen J. "The Russians Are Getting Better", *Foreign Affairs*, 6 September 2023.

its command posts and logistics centres to the rear of the front line so that the effectiveness of precision missile and drone strikes against them would be decreased.

NATO's most optimistic calculations during the planning period estimated that the Ukrainian army could advance 30 kilometres per day following the example of the autumn 2022 Kherson counteroffensive<sup>13</sup>, potentially allowing it to reach the Sea of Azov within a week. The reality would be very different.

On 5<sup>th</sup> June, the Ukrainian armed forces began what the Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Defence, Hanna Maliar, called "offensive actions in several directions"<sup>14</sup>. A major offensive had begun in five areas of the front line in the south of Donetsk Oblast in the Zaporizhzhia sector, with two main directions of attack that briefly broke through the first Russian defences. However, from the very first moment, the Ukrainian troops came up against the solidity of the Russian defences, which regained the lost positions that same afternoon.



Source: Author's own based on <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2023/09/world/ukraine-war-counteroffensive-maps-guide-dq/>

<sup>13</sup> "Ukraine's commander-in-chief on the breakthrough he needs to beat Russia", *The Economist*, 2 November 2023.

<sup>14</sup> HODGE, Nathan; SHUKLA, Sebastian; VOITOVYCH, Olga; NOOR HAQ, Sana. "Ukrainian offensive is "taking place in several directions", says official", *CNN*, 8 June 2023.

Despite the Ukrainian army's early inability to break through the front, revealing that the offensive was likely to end in failure, the Ukrainian command decided to persevere in its attempts to push forward in a stubborn and protracted effort that lasted several months. There was fierce fighting for the duration of the offensive, but Ukrainian advances were minimal, with some tactical successes that did not translate into strategic results.

By November 2023, the exhausted Ukrainian troops ran out of assault-capable infantry and more dangerously, ammunition. Five months after the start, momentum was exhausted and the offensive stalled with heavy casualties and numerous artillery units suffering from a severe lack of ammunition. Any attempt to move forward became unfeasible<sup>15</sup>.

In order to relieve military pressure on the Zaporizhzhia front, the Ukrainian armed forces launched a diversionary action in Kherson Oblast near the mouth of the Dnieper. On 30 October 2023, Ukrainian marines crossed the river and took Krynky on the left bank with the support of MRLS rocket launchers and artillery. Although they managed to establish a small bridgehead, they were unable to extend it and advance south towards the Crimea, and were trapped on the left bank of the river. Heavy fighting to hold the riverbank continued for eight months, with heavy losses for the Ukrainians, who finally abandoned it in June 2024. The Russian forces also suffered heavy attrition and wasted some of their best units in counter-attacks - including the 382<sup>nd</sup> and 337<sup>th</sup> Airborne regiments - but it were the Ukrainian marines who paid the heaviest price for holding a bridgehead over the Dnieper, which never made more sense than to become another battle of attrition<sup>16</sup>.

By the end of 2023, it was clear that the results of the Ukrainian offensive had fallen far short of the ambitious strategic goals that had been set, and at a very high cost in human lives and materials for both sides. According to the Russian Defence Ministry, more than 90,000 Ukrainians were wounded and killed, nearly 600 tanks and around 1,900 armoured vehicles lost during the counteroffensive. For their part, the Ukrainians estimated Russian losses at 15,000 casualties per month, with a peak of 25,000 casualties during August, when the heaviest fighting took place<sup>17</sup>. Although these figures

---

<sup>15</sup> JAFFE, Greg; RYAN, Missy. "Ukraine's counteroffensive stalls amid Russian defenses". *The Washington Post*, December 2023.

<sup>16</sup> OSTILLER, Nate; FORNUSEK, Martin. "With Krynky lost, what did the perilous operation accomplish?", *Kievindependent.com*, 18 June 2024.

<sup>17</sup> HIRD, Karolina; HARWARD, Christina ..... "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment", *ISW*, 30 October 2023.

for both sides should be treated with caution, they are an indicator of the severity of the fighting.

The causes of the offensive's failure were manifold, starting with excessive ambition in terms of the objectives to be achieved. To this should be added Ukraine's inferior artillery firepower, lack of air support, inadequate means to overcome the extensive minefields prepared by Russia, and the lack of initiative of the Ukrainian commanders at the tactical level, whose limited experience and military training prevented them from exploiting gaps in the Russian lines and rapidly moving deeper before they could be closed.

Another key factor was Ukraine's inability to adjust its strategy to the circumstances, once the initial two-pronged attack proved ineffective, to which should be added that after a year and a half of war, Russian forces had proven to be more effective and their command competent than Western assessments had expected<sup>18</sup>.

In November, in an unexpected gesture of honesty towards his soldiers, Ukrainian Chief of General Staff General Valerii Zaluzhnyi admitted that the war was "at a stalemate" and that no significant breakthrough was possible unless there was a "massive technological leap"<sup>19</sup>. If this did not happen, Russia would have the upper hand in a near-stalemate war of attrition, having more human and natural resources, while Ukraine would bleed to exhaustion, leading to its inevitable defeat.

What Zaluzhnyi was criticising, without saying so openly, was that Western allies, fearful of escalation, had been too cautious in sending state-of-the-art weaponry and that deliveries had been deliberately withheld in an attempt to keep Ukraine's war effort within limits. The consequence of this deliberate Western attitude was that weaponry had not been delivered in the time, quantity and quality required for the Ukrainian offensive to succeed. He especially stated that "Ukraine's counteroffensive was held back by a lack of modern fighter aircraft and artillery ammunition"<sup>20</sup> attributing the failure to a lack of F-16 fighter aircraft and MGM-140 ATACMS deep strike tactical ballistic missiles.

---

<sup>18</sup> SCIUTTO, Jim. "Early stages of Ukrainian counteroffensive 'not meeting expectations,' Western officials tell" *CNN*, 13 July 2023.

<sup>19</sup> "Ukraine's commander-in-chief on the breakthrough he needs to beat Russia", *The Economist*. 1 November 2023.

<sup>20</sup> "Ukraine commander irked by lack of arms promised for offensive", *Al Jazeera*, 1 July 2023.

General Zaluzhnyi's criticism led to his dismissal on 8 February 2024 as Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and he was replaced by General Oleksandr Syrskiy who had previously served as Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Land Forces. He was an energetic military man, whose Russian background had not prevented him from being the architect of the successful counter-offensive in Kharkov in 2022. However, his disregard for the lives of his soldiers during the battle of Bakhmut had brought him under heavy criticism for "pursuing bloody Soviet-style military tactics" that resulted in heavy Ukrainian losses<sup>21</sup>.

The failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive made it clear that it was impossible to conduct warfare based on manoeuvring large units, forcing the Ukrainian Command to reinvent infiltration tactics that had not been used in any conventional warfare since World War II. That is, small detachments had to be reinstated, infiltrating through minefields and stealthily clearing the terrain with the support of artillery and drones and then assaulting Russian positions in an attempt to capture them, or cause their attrition. The downside of this recovered tactic of infantry combat was that the small size of the assault teams and the duration of the operations usually resulted in a slower counter-offensive and a better ability of the Russian defenders to react to attacks.

Neither did the Wagner Group's rebellion against President Vladimir Putin, which took place during the offensive, have a significant impact on operations, nor did it translate into immediate benefits for Ukraine, despite the ease with which Wagner's forces came within 200 km of Moscow<sup>22</sup>. Perhaps the most important effect of this coup attempt was the fact that "Russian forces did nothing more to stop Wagner's advance"<sup>23</sup>, highlighting Russia's inability to react quickly to such unforeseen events, as well as its lack of reserves.

The disappointing outcome of the offensive translated into growing disillusionment among the Ukrainian public about the future of operations and faith in victory. When President Zelenskyy was asked if he was satisfied with the results of the counteroffensive, he could only give an ambiguous answer, stating "Look, we are not going backwards, I am satisfied. We are fighting the second (best) army in the world," adding, "We are losing

---

<sup>21</sup> "Zaluzhny is out, the "butcher" is in", *Politico*, 8 February 2024.

<sup>22</sup> "Wagner: Russians reflect on group's advance towards Moscow", *BBC News*, 2 July 2023.

<sup>23</sup> BALMFORTH, Tom. "Analysis: Mutiny lays bare prospect for Putin of "forever war" in Ukraine", *Reuters*, 6 June 2023.

people, I am not satisfied. We didn't get all the weapons we wanted, I can't be satisfied, but I can't complain too much" <sup>24</sup>.

Perhaps he could not have said otherwise given the circumstances, with the declining flow of US military aid, the growing mostly-Republican opposition to the war in Ukraine, and the emergence of a new war in Gaza, which shifted the focus of US strategic concerns to the Middle East<sup>25</sup>. The conflict was entering "a new phase", in which the harsh winter would complicate the military situation in Ukraine and the course of operations, which were now under Russia's initiative.

### **Russia takes the initiative. The Battle of Avdiivka**

In early October 2023, with the Ukrainian offensive stalled, the Russian high command decided that the time had come to go on the offensive. The focus shifted to Avdiivka, a town in Donetsk Oblast that was considered the gateway to the western Donbas<sup>26</sup>. Avdiivka, which numbered around 32,000 people before the war - reduced to about 2,500 people by 2023 - was a strategic point of Ukrainian defences in the Donetsk region, protecting several key military positions further west and putting the nearby Russian-controlled city of Donetsk under artillery fire and constant threat of assault.

Militarily it was heavily fortified, with a dense system of trenches, firing positions and bunkers reinforced with reinforced concrete, making it very difficult to conquer. Its defensive conditions could be compared to those of the Azovstal steel plant during the siege of Mariupol, which Russia fought so hard to take in 2022. The capture of Avdiivka, which has been virtually surrounded by Russian forces since March 2023, would allow the occupation of a strategic town that has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance and would also remove the threat of the Ukrainian army from the nearby Russian-held city of Donetsk<sup>27</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup> JORDAN, James; KULLAB, Samya; NOVIKOV, Illia. "The AP Interview: Ukraine's Zelensky says the war with Russia is in a new phase as winter looms", *Associated Press*, 1 December 2023.

<sup>25</sup> O FALK, Thomas. "Why are US Republicans pushing for aid to Israel but not Ukraine?", *Aljazeera*, 8 November 2023.

<sup>26</sup> ABDURASULOV, Abdujalil. "Ukraine war: Russia attacks Avdiivka stronghold in eastern Ukraine", *BBC*, 12 October 2023.

<sup>27</sup> ABDURASULOV, Abdujalil. "Ukraine war: Russia attacks Avdiivka stronghold in eastern Ukraine", *BBC*, 12 October 2023.

The battle for Avdiivka, also known as the "second Bakhmut" or "Bakhmut 2.0" due to the similarities in battlefield conditions, the tactics employed by both sides, and the high number of casualties<sup>28</sup>, began on 10<sup>th</sup> October when three Russian motorised rifle brigades launched an offensive action, employing a new assault tactic. Previously, Russia's attack on the fortified Ukrainian town of Bakhmut in 2023 had basically consisted of launching successive waves of infantry units against heavily fortified Ukrainian positions, which were finally captured after several months, albeit at the cost of tens of thousands of casualties. At Avdiivka, the aim was to avoid a frontal clash and reduce casualties by double encircling the city, but this did not prevent it from becoming one of the bloodiest and fiercest battles of the war<sup>29</sup>.



Source: The Kyiv independent. <https://kyivindependent.com/avdiivka-defense-uncertain-as-ukraine-struggles-with-fortification/>

Initially, the assault troops maintained the conventional Russian doctrine of attacking in waves, with the first wave consisting of lightly-armed, low-ranking soldiers to force the defenders to expend their limited ammunition stocks, followed by well-trained troops to exploit weaknesses identified in the Ukrainian defences. This tactic was complemented by reconnaissance, ambushes and sabotage actions by special operations personnel

<sup>28</sup> FARRELL, Francis. "Surviving Avdiivka: Russia intensifies assault on city deemed a 'second Bakhmut'", *The Kyiv Independent*, 23 March 2023.

<sup>29</sup> "Russian offensive campaign assessment, 15 February 2024". *Institute for the Study of War*. 15 February 2024.

who infiltrated behind the front lines using the city's extensive network of tunnels<sup>30</sup>. However, as the battle dragged on, the Russian wave tactic was replaced by the use of well-rested and trained professional soldiers infiltrating the city in small groups under heavy artillery bombardment<sup>31</sup>.

The Russian command also changed the profile of the fighters. While the bulk of the forces in Bakhmut were provided by Wagner's mercenaries, in Avdiivka, Russia decided to use the 8th Combined Arms Army as its main force, consisting of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps of the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). These were units made up of soldiers native to the Donbas, with long combat experience against Ukrainian soldiers gained in the long low-intensity war that followed the Euromaidan revolution of 2014. To this force were added the 20<sup>th</sup> and 150<sup>th</sup> Guards Motor Rifle Division of the regular army of the Russian Federation, which acted as a reserve<sup>32</sup>.

Two days into the attack, Russian forces had "not secured any major breakthrough"<sup>33</sup> and were unlikely to be able to encircle Ukrainian forces, due to heavy losses and counter-attacks on the southern flank of the Russian deployment. The heavy fighting forced Russian forces to take an operational halt to regroup and reinforce, moving the 6<sup>th</sup> Motorised Rifle Division from the Zaporizhzhia front to Avdiivka. A few days later, they resumed operations with the capture of the mountain of rubble west of the railway and the Coca-Cola plant, a tactically important high position, given that it overlooked the city<sup>34</sup>.

In early November 2023, the pace of Russian attacks slowed momentarily due to worsening weather conditions, with heavy rain and mud complicating movement and logistics for both armies. By then, Russian troops had captured at least 60 percent of the industrial zone southeast of the city, which constituted Ukraine's fortified frontline zone and had been in their hands since 2014. To avoid a frontal attack on such a strong position, Russian units began to expand into the "grey zone" north of Avdiivka in an

---

<sup>30</sup> BABENKO, Alex; ARHIROVA, Hanna; BLANN, Susie; HINNANT, Lori. "Exhaustion, dwindling reserves and a commander who disappeared: How Ukraine lost Avdiivka to Russia", *Associated Press*, 11 March 2024.

<sup>31</sup> MELKOZEROVA, Veronika. "Cracks appear in Ukraine's eastern fortress of Avdiivka", *Politico*, 8 February 2024.

<sup>32</sup> EVANS, Angelica; STEPANENKO, Kateryna; HARWARD, Christina; MAPPE, Grace; W. KAGAN, Frederick. "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 28, 2023". *Institute for the Study of War*, 28 October 2024.

<sup>33</sup> "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment", *Institute for the Study of War*, 15 October 2023.

<sup>34</sup> "Russia and Ukraine intensify fight over Avdiivka, another ruined city". *The Washington Post*. 27 October 2023.

enveloping movement. This movement was hampered by Ukrainian possession of a coal plant that Ukrainian troops had converted into an "almost perfect" defensive position, complete with tunnels, railway lines and narrow alleys that provided Ukraine with a very important "local defensive advantage"<sup>35</sup>.

Despite the strength of the defences, constant waves of Russian attacks eventually exhausted the Ukrainian lines and on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, the 255<sup>th</sup> regiment belonging to the Russian 20<sup>th</sup> Guards Motor Rifle Division captured the defensive fortifications south-west of the industrial zone. The following day began the "third wave" of Russian assaults on Avdiivka by several mechanised columns, so that by 4<sup>th</sup> December, the entire industrial zone was under the control of Russian forces advancing from "all directions" while heavy fighting raged around the coal plant<sup>36</sup>. At this point, Russian forces outnumbered the Ukrainian defenders by five to one and had overwhelming air and artillery superiority against Ukrainian units reporting insufficient supplies and a shortage of 155mm ammunition.

Russian assaults continued until early January 2024, with no appreciable results. They then decided to replace their tactic of trying to outflank Avdiivka with rapid armoured assaults that were exposed to defensive reaction, with infiltrations by small infantry assault groups that avoided direct attacks on the Ukrainian positions. They also changed attack directions from the north and west of the city to attack from the south and east. These changes resulted in significant advances by Russian forces in the south, which were in part facilitated by the infiltration of a small number of special operations troops through the sewer network to emerge behind Ukrainian positions<sup>37</sup>.

By 22<sup>nd</sup> January, Russian troops had entered urban areas to the north and west of the city and were in the vicinity of the coal plant defended by the Ukrainian 110<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigade, but their counter-attacks to regain lost positions were unsuccessful. A month later, the situation in the town had become critical with the Russians advancing towards

---

<sup>35</sup> "Russia Trying to Encircle Avdiivka, Situation 'Very Hot'", *Kyiv Post*, 16 November 2023.

<sup>36</sup> «Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 22, 2023», *Institute for the Study of War*, 22 Noviembre 2023.

<sup>37</sup> KORSHAK, Stefan. "Russian Infantry Scores Gains in Battleground Avdiivka, Both Sides Predict More Big Attacks", *Kyiv Post*, 6 January 2024.

the centre of Avdiivka and the Ukrainian 110<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigade exhausted with "everyone who can hold a machine gun"<sup>38</sup> used to hold the front line.

The Russians used their air power to drop hundreds of FAB-1500 glide bombs on Avdiivka, which are highly lethal because they can glide long distances and create a 15-metre-wide crater, displacing objects inside it by more than 500 metres. This, together with their increased drone production and artillery superiority - which allowed them to fire five shells for every Ukrainian one - made Ukrainian defences "hell" and "a blessing for Putin's side"<sup>39</sup>, consolidating their gains<sup>40</sup>. Ukrainian forces attempted to compensate for the lack of artillery shells by using their own drones, which proved to be highly sensitive to the adverse conditions of the Ukrainian winter<sup>41</sup>.

Faced with the difficult situation, in mid-February, the Ukrainian Command was forced to transfer its last reserves, especially the 3rd Assault Brigade, which was considered an elite unit, but which had suffered heavy losses in the battle of Bakhmut and had not had time to recover. This Brigade was deployed at the coal plant. The 110<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigade of the Ukrainian army, which had been defending the city non-stop since March 2022 and was exhausted, started to leave the city. The Ukrainian Command's decision to partially withdraw from Avdiivka<sup>42</sup> was confirmed, before Russian forces cut the Ukrainian land line of communication to the rear and surrounded the units defending the city centre and the southernmost fortifications of the city's southern bastion of trenches and fortifications<sup>43</sup>.

To weaken the Ukrainian defence, the Russian Air Force bombed Ukrainian positions throughout the city without encountering resistance due to the lack of anti-aircraft artillery.

---

<sup>38</sup> FREEMAN, Colin. "Should this Ukrainian city fall to Russia, 'it will be America's fault'". *The Telegraph*, 9 February 2024.

<sup>39</sup> COLUMBA JEREZ, Alexia. «FAB-1500: una nueva bomba rusa casi indestructible que causa estragos en Ucrania», *ABC*, 17 March 2024.

<sup>40</sup> ZORIA, Yuri. "UK Intel: Russia steps up assaults on Avdiivka with bombs and troops", *Euromaidan Press*, 8 February 2024.

<sup>41</sup> AXE, David. "A Ukrainian Brigade Ran Low On Ammo. That, Plus Some Bad Weather, Was All The Advantage Russian Troops Needed To Breach Avdiivka", *Forbes*, 6 February 2024.

<sup>42</sup> KHALILOVA, Dinara. "Military: Ukraine reinforcing Avdiivka as Russia continues its offensive". *The Kyiv Independent*, 13 February 2024).

<sup>43</sup> BAILEY, Riley; WOLKOV, Nicole; EVANS, Angelica; STEPANENKO, Kateryna; BARROS, George; KAGAN, Frederick W. "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment", *Institute for the Study of War*, 15 February 2024.

The use of incendiary munitions produced a cloud of toxic smoke that covered the entire city, turning it into a futuristic sci-fi movie set<sup>44</sup>.

On the night of 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> February, to avoid being annihilated, the exhausted troops of the 110<sup>th</sup> Ukrainian Brigade abandoned the "Zenith" defensive position" under a hail of artillery shells and machine-gun fire" suffering heavy casualties in the retreat and left to their fate<sup>45</sup>. This was a bastion of trenches and fortifications on the southern flank of Avdiivka, which had prevented any direct assault from the south for years. The area was immediately occupied by the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps of the Donetsk People's Republic, which meant that the city's fate was sealed.

On 16<sup>th</sup> February, 15,000 Russian troops completed the encirclement, leaving all of Avdiivka in their hands. Simultaneously, 5,000 Ukrainian troops attempted a mass withdrawal, which took place in an increasingly chaotic and costly manner<sup>46</sup>. The last to retreat were the soldiers of the formidable 3<sup>rd</sup> Assault Brigade who had covered the withdrawal of the remaining units from the coal plant. They did so via the so-called "road of death"<sup>47</sup>, where they were hit by Russian artillery and drones, resulting in their almost complete destruction. This final phase of the battle was described by the New York Times as the "fiercest battle of the war"<sup>48</sup> and is reflected in the fact that no more than 300 Ukrainian soldiers were taken prisoner by the Russian forces, who were accused of war crimes<sup>49</sup>.

On 18 February 2024, Russian flags flew all over the city, including the coal plant, as the Russian Ministry of Defence declared that Russian forces had taken "full control" of Avdiivka. With Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulating his troops on the capture of the town, the commander in charge of the assault on Avdiivka, Colonel General Andrei Mordvichev, ended a four-month battle that Western media such as the New York Times

---

<sup>44</sup> "Inside Ukraine's last stand in Avdiivka and its 'road of death'", *The Washington Post*, 2 March 2024.

<sup>45</sup> BAILEY, Riley; WOLKOV, Nicole; EVANS, Angelica; STEPANENKO, Kateryna; BARROS, George; KAGAN, Frederick W. "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment", *Institute for the Study of War*, 15 February 2024.

<sup>46</sup> KORSHAK, Stefan. "Ukraine Withdraws From Position South of Embattled Avdiivka as Kremlin Infantry Advances", *Kyiv Post*, 16 February 2024.

<sup>47</sup> "Exhaustion, dwindling reserves and a commander who disappeared: How Ukraine lost Avdiivka to Russia", *Washington Post*, 11 March 2024.

<sup>48</sup> GALL, Carlotta; TUNG, Nicole. "Both Sides Pay a Bloody Price for Coveted Ukrainian City". *The New York Times*. 30 October 2023.

<sup>49</sup> ABDURASULOV, Abdujalil. "Avdiivka: Russia accused of executing prisoners of war after Ukraine withdraws", *BBC News*, 20 February 2024.

called "the first major battle won by Russian forces" since the capture of Bakhmut in May 2023<sup>50</sup>.

Although the number of casualties is one of the best-kept secrets of this war, in February 2024, the US Institute for the Study of War (ISW) claimed, using Ukrainian estimates, that Russian casualties after the capture of Avdiivka could range from 16,000 to 47,000 dead and wounded<sup>51</sup>, peaking at the height of the battle in February 2024. Ukrainian casualties would have been somewhat lower as they were on the defensive and therefore initially better protected, although Russia's vastly superior firepower and their retreat under enormous pressure would have brought their numbers closer to those of the Russians.

Russia's success was largely due to insufficient arms supplies for Ukraine<sup>52</sup> and, primarily due to ammunition shortages resulting from the US Congress withholding \$60 billion in promised military aid since October 2023. Ultimately, however, the key decisive factor in the Russians' capture of Avdiivka was that their forces had dramatically improved their air-ground cooperation capabilities, so that they were able to take advantage of their air superiority to "provide ground troops with close air support"<sup>53</sup> through the routine use of glide bombs over Ukrainian positions. This factor proved to be decisive in the final outcome of the offensive operation. Before his dismissal, General Zaluzhnyi himself admitted that they had underestimated the willingness of Russian leaders and soldiers to fight, stating that "Russia has lost at least 150,000 dead. In any other country, such casualties would have stopped the war"<sup>54</sup>.

The Battle of Avdiivka was an enormous operational and logistical challenge for Ukraine, as well as a huge psychological cost in terms of the decision to withdraw from a city whose fall was a serious loss for the Ukrainian army. However, to its credit, the Ukrainian army was able to meet the goal set by its commander-in-chief, General Syrskiy, of preserving its combat power and preparing for future operations. The 110<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigade, which had defended Avdiivka for almost two years, displayed immense self-sacrifice, as

---

<sup>50</sup> CARLOTTA, Gall; SANTORA, Marc; MÉHEUT, Constant. "Avdiivka, Longtime Stronghold for Ukraine, Falls to Russians", *New York Times*, 17 February 2024.

<sup>51</sup> "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 21, 2024". *Institute for the Study of War*.

<sup>52</sup> FAULCONBRIDGE, Tom; BALMFORTH, Guy. "Russia takes Avdiivka from Ukraine, biggest gain in nine months" *Reuters*, 18 February 2024.

<sup>53</sup> PSAROPOULOS, John T. "Era of peace in Europe over says Ukraine, as Avdiivka falls to Russians", *Aljazeera*, 22 February 2024

<sup>54</sup> MÉHEUT, Andrew E. and KRAMER, Josh. "Ukraine's Top Commander Says War Has Hit a 'Stalemate'". *The New York Times*. 2 November 2023.

did the 3<sup>rd</sup> Assault Brigade which acted as a security force. The high human and material cost of the retreat once again highlighted the enormous obstacles faced by any army doing so under enemy pressure<sup>55</sup>.

The capture of the city significantly boosted the morale of the Russian army and also provided Russian President Vladimir Putin with a political victory just weeks before Russia's 2024 presidential elections. These ran from 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> March 2024 with a landslide victory for Vladimir Putin who was re-elected for a third consecutive term with 88% of the vote, the highest percentage of victory in a Russian presidential election since the dissolution of the Soviet Union<sup>56</sup>.

On 29<sup>th</sup> February, Ukraine's military chief, Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi, issued a bitter report stating that his inspection of troop behaviour in the Donetsk region had revealed that some commanders made "certain miscalculations in mastering the situation and assessing the enemy". The mistakes directly affected the stability of the defence in certain directions and emphasised the importance of having experienced and decisive commanders.<sup>57</sup> President Zelenskyy, for his part, was much more restrained, praising his troops for "exhausting" the Russian forces.

### **Russia opens a new front. The battle for Kharkov**

The conquest of Avdiivka improved Russian military logistics and replenished losses in Donetsk Oblast in anticipation of future ground advances, whilst demonstrating that Russia was capable of sustaining its offensive war effort for a prolonged period of time. With its economy adapted to a wartime scenario, total military spending representing a third of its national budget and amounting to around 7.5% of GDP, GDP growth of over 3.6% by 2023, and inflation contained at less than 9%<sup>58</sup>, Russia could meet the needs of its population and simultaneously supply its armed forces with personnel and material. Moreover, the supply of artillery ammunition, loitering munitions and ballistic missiles from

---

<sup>55</sup> FORTE, Ryan N. "The Battle of Avdiivka and Its Lessons on Withdrawal Under Pressure", Modern War Institute, 12 March 2024.

<sup>56</sup> ROMERO, Adrián. «Elecciones en Rusia Putin, reelegido para un quinto mandato con más del 87% de los votos en unas elecciones sin alternativa», RTVE, 18 March 2024.

<sup>57</sup> BABENKO, Alex; ARHIROVA, Hanna; BLANN, Susie; HINNANT, Lori. "Exhaustion, dwindling reserves and a commander who disappeared: How Ukraine lost Avdiivka to Russia", *Yahoo News*, 11 March 2024

<sup>58</sup> World Bank 2023 Data. Available at

<https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=RU>

Iran and North Korea reinforced their capabilities and accentuated the military imbalance to Russia's advantage. This meant that it could count on enough missiles and drones to maintain constant pressure on Ukraine's air defences and continue the ground offensive, while attacking its defence industry and eroding the civilian and military morale of the Ukrainian population<sup>59</sup>.

Against this favourable background, the Russian Command decided to seize the offensive momentum and continue the advance westwards from Avdiivka, capturing several nearby settlements with little opposition. Russian forces were able to maintain a high operational tempo and exploit the tactical opportunities offered by the victory at Avdiivka<sup>60</sup>. A few weeks later, on 10 May 2024, the Russian Command decided to open a new front north of Donetsk Oblast, launching a complex attack with aircraft, armoured tanks, artillery and mechanised infantry troops targeting Kharkov, Ukraine's second largest city. This was the second Russian attempt to advance on the city, after Ukrainian troops had successfully repelled the first during the invasion in February 2022.

Additionally, Russia could create a buffer zone at the front line that would keep attacks by Russian volunteer militias fighting on behalf of Ukraine under the Russian Volunteer Corps and the Russian Freedom Legion away from the Russian border<sup>61</sup>. These units of pro-Ukrainian Russians had conducted disruptive cross-border raids in the Kursk and Belgorod regions in 2023 and later in 2024, as they challenged the Kremlin's ability to protect its borders and to which, the Russians had to commit significant means in order to destroy them<sup>62</sup>.

Rather than mounting a full-scale new offensive, the Russian incursion therefore appeared to be part of a deliberate strategy to draw Ukraine's reserves from the Chasiv Yar and Avdiivka area<sup>63</sup> where Russia was preparing the main spring offensive. With a troop strength of no more than 48,000<sup>64</sup>, this was a secondary diversionary manoeuvre,

---

<sup>59</sup> BARRY, Ben. "What Russia's momentum in Ukraine means for the war in 2024", *IJSS*, 13 March 2024.

<sup>60</sup> EVANS, Angelica; BAILEY, Riley; HARWARD, Christina; MAPPE, Grace; W. KAGAN, Frederick. «Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 27, 2024» *Institute for the Study of War*, 27 Febrero 2024.

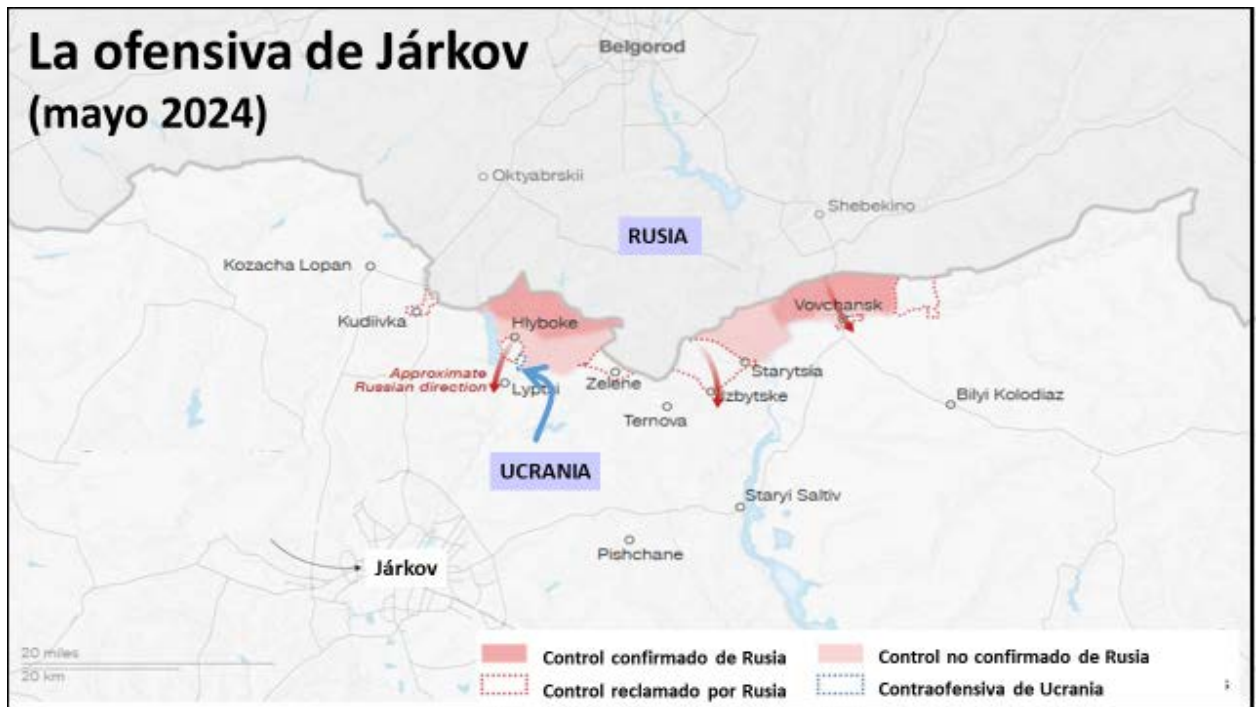
<sup>61</sup> «Kremlin Says the Only Way to Protect Russia Is to Create a Buffer Zone with Ukraine», *Reuters*, 18 Marzo 2024, sec. Europe.

<sup>62</sup> HUNDER, Max; CHORNOKONDRATENKO, Margaryta. «Anti-Kremlin Fighters Launch Cross-Border Attacks into Russia from Ukraine», *Reuters*, 12 Marzo 2024, sec. Europe.

<sup>63</sup> AXE, David, «Russia's Victory Day Offensive In Northern Ukraine Might Be A Feint», *Forbes*, 11 Septiembre 2024.

<sup>64</sup> «Ukraine's desperate struggle to defend Kharkiv», *The Economist*, 11 Septiembre 2024.

while the main military operations effort continued to unfold slowly but inexorably 150 miles to the south, heading towards the small, strategically located town of Chasiv Yar from Avdiivka. The seizure of this former factory town would allow Russian forces to position themselves close enough to the Kostyantynivka-Kramatorsk-Sloviansk highway in the Ukrainian rear to cut Ukrainian supply lines.



Source: The Kyiv independent. <https://kyivindependent.com/avdiivka-defense-uncertain-as-ukraine-struggles-with-fortification/>

The offensive came at a very difficult time for Ukraine, when its troops seemed ill-prepared to resist a new offensive<sup>65</sup>, as a result of the attrition caused by the fighting of the previous months. Moreover, stretching the defensive deployment along a 1,000 km front had reduced its defence capability, and forced, in case of attack, a partial redeployment of troops drawn from other areas that were weakened and exposed to secondary attacks<sup>66</sup>.

Fortunately for the Ukrainians, the uncertainty over their military situation greatly improved in late April, when the US finally approved a \$61 billion military aid package that

<sup>65</sup> BEALE, Jonathan. «Russians simply walked in, Ukraine troops in Kharkiv tell BBC», *BBC*, 13 Mayo 2024.

<sup>66</sup> DYSA, Yuliia; MALENKO, Anastasiia; BALMFORTH, Tom. "Zelenskiy visits Ukraine's embattled Kharkiv as Russian pressure mounts in east", *Reuters*, 16 May 2024.

included missiles, artillery and air defence systems, badly needed at the time to bolster the weakened Ukrainian Armed Forces<sup>67</sup>.

But what really changed the situation on the ground to Ukraine's advantage was that in May, the United States lifted restrictions preventing troops from using weapons supplied inside Russian territory near the border. The Americans had concluded that continued Russian threats of escalation, if used, were unfounded and empty<sup>68</sup>.

With the veto lifted, Ukraine used sophisticated US-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) to attack Russian S-300 missiles, which were striking Kharkov from positions near the border<sup>69</sup>. This stopped the Russian offensive in its early stages, while giving Ukrainian troops enough time to relocate reinforcements from the south and the east.

Therefore, it does not seem that the Russians had really thought they could occupy Kharkov<sup>70</sup>, a heavily defended city where the Ukrainians had built a complex system of defences that included kilometres of barbed-wire trenches, minefields and countless lines of anti-tank dragon's teeth. This seemed to be demonstrated by the fact that a few days after the attack began, Russian soldiers only managed to claim occupation of a small area on the outskirts of Vovchansk, a town close to the border and 70 kilometres from Kharkov. Russia did not have enough soldiers to take the city.

By 6<sup>th</sup> July, Russian forces were far from achieving their objective of creating a 15-kilometre buffer zone inside Ukraine, with the Russian Command's poor operational direction and the limited tactical skills of Colonel General Alexander Lapin, commander of Russia's North Group of Troops, failing to achieve more than a modest attempt to advance modestly in the direction of Vovchansk<sup>71</sup>. By that time, the situation had reached a military stalemate in the Kharkov sector, which would provide new opportunities for Ukraine to act elsewhere, at a time when it was in dire need of some military successes

---

<sup>67</sup> «Ukraine in Maps: Tracking the War with Russia», BBC, 24 Febrero 2022.

<sup>68</sup> DISS, Kathryn. «Russian offensive stalls in the unbreakable city of Kharkiv as Ukraine pushes back»; *ABC News*, 24 Junio 2024.

<sup>69</sup> MILLER, Christopher. "Russia targets Ukraine's Kharkiv region in deadly missile attacks". *FT*, 23 May 2024.

<sup>70</sup> GETTLEMAN, Jeffrey; DUCKE, Emile. «Russian Attacks Open a New Front in Ukraine», *The New York Times*, 11 Mayo 2024.

<sup>71</sup> EVANS, Angelica; BAILEY, Riley; HARWARD, Christina; MAPPEES, Grace; W. KAGAN, Frederick. «Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 6, 2024» *Institute for the Study of War*, 6 Julio 2024.

that would let it justify continued Western military assistance and, eventually, any form of negotiation on acceptable terms.

The final balance of the Kharkov offensive may be described as favourable for Ukraine and a serious operational failure for the Russian forces, due to the large number of troops and equipment lost and the small territorial gains achieved. A few days into the attack, the attack stopped far short of Kharkov and had not achieved its objective of destroying Ukrainian reserves. However, the Ukrainian success at Kharkov was only a temporary solution to its operational woes, as it failed to fundamentally alter the dynamics of the war and Russian advances on other fronts.

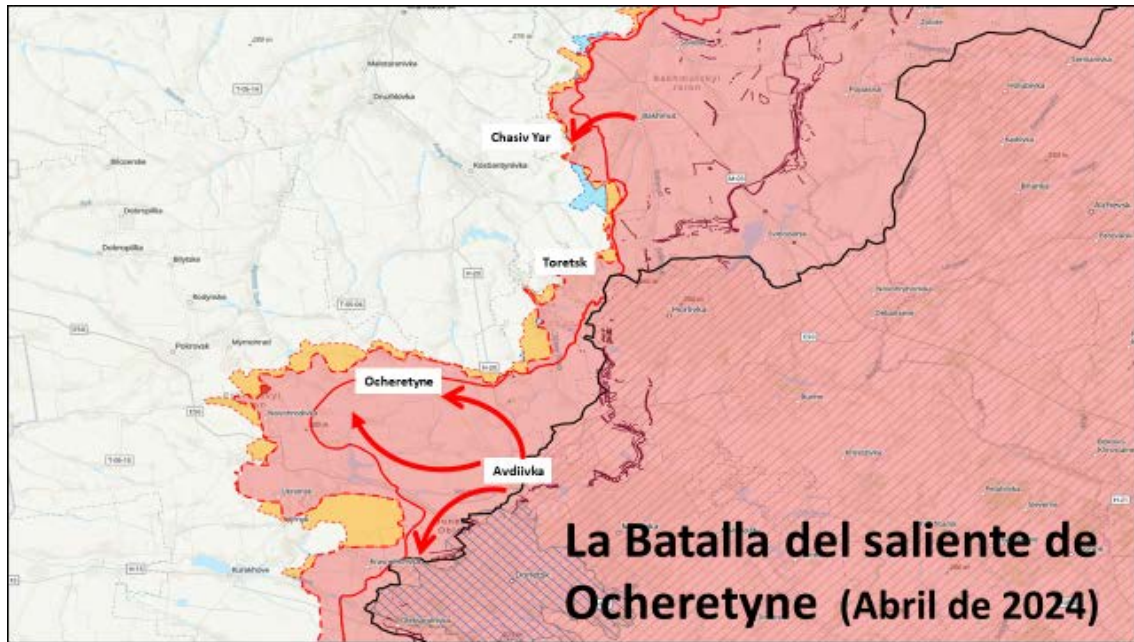
With the start of the Ukrainian incursion into Russia's Kursk Oblast in August 2024, activity in Kharkov dropped significantly, with minor clashes along the front line. The Ukrainian forces held firm and, although the city came under repeated glide bomb attacks from Russian aircraft, it remained out of range of their territorial ambitions and also of their artillery<sup>72</sup>.

### **Russia advances in the east. The Ocheretyne ridge line offensive**

The raid north of Kharkov was conducted at a considerable distance from the main front region in the so-called Ocheretyne ridge line, where Russia was continuing its offensive operations after the successful capture of Avdiivka. After a short operational pause to reorganise, the Russian army continued its advance westwards with the aim of capturing the town of Pokrovsk in Donetsk Oblast, a town located about 80 kilometres northwest of Avdiivka. It was the main logistical base for Ukrainian troops on the eastern front line, as well as an important communications centre where several major roads and railway lines intersect. Pokrovsk was therefore a natural continuation of the battle for Avdiivka as its fall could mean the collapse of the entire front line.

---

<sup>72</sup> «Ukraine in Maps».



Source: Author's own based on the ISW map.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

Further north, Russian attention focused on the hilltop town of Chasiv Yar, which overlooks some of Donetsk's important towns that still remain under Ukrainian control. For this offensive, the Russian Command had deployed about a third of the Central Army Group, - some 30,000 troops - along with its best reserves<sup>73</sup>.

On 14<sup>th</sup> April, Russian forces advanced north towards Ocheretyne, resulting in a battle of attrition that lasted several days and ended favourably for the Russians, after Ukraine's 115<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigade defending the town abandoned its frontline positions without permission, leaving the sector undefended and allowing Russian forces to advance five kilometres<sup>74</sup>.

Faced with the gravity of the situation, the Ukrainian Command had no choice but to call on the battered 47<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigade, a unit that had done very well at Avdiivka, but had not had the time to recover from the very heavy fighting there. The deployment of these reserves in the area did not prevent the capture of Ocheretyne by Russian forces on 28<sup>th</sup> April. Also contributing to this defeat was the dire Ukrainian military situation due

<sup>73</sup> ABISHEV, Ilya; BENNETT, Tom. «Russia pushes on key Ukraine city of Pokrovsk while Kyiv's Kursk incursion slows», *BBC*, 31 Agosto 2024.

<sup>74</sup> AXE, David. «Cut Off Near Prohres, 2 Ukrainian Battalions Fought Their Way Out», 11 Septiembre 2024.

to shortages of ammunition and equipment<sup>75</sup>. The Russian Defence Ministry confirmed the capture on 5<sup>th</sup> May.

After a brief operational pause, fighting began on 17<sup>th</sup> July for Prohres, a village in the centre of Donetsk province, which Russian forces occupied without too much trouble the next day. The advance was largely due to heavy Russian air strikes, which caused the collapse and subsequent withdrawal of the defending 110<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigades. The capture of the village of Prohres put the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) in the Ocheretyne ridgeline sector in a difficult position, as it threatened Ukrainian supply lines in the most vulnerable part of the frontline<sup>76</sup>.

During August, with the best Ukrainian units engaged in their risky raid on Kursk, Russian forces continued to advance slowly but steadily to within a few kilometres of the city of Pokrovsk. The situation became very complicated for the Ukrainians, as President Zelenskyy himself admitted<sup>77</sup>. At the end of August, the Russian army took the important Ukrainian town of Novohrodivka, which had a pre-war population of 20,000, without fighting. The decision to not defend it was widely criticised in Ukraine and was explained by the fact that, with its forces underequipped and outnumbered by the Russians, the Ukrainian army felt that defending it was not worth the potential losses and that it was preferable to withdraw to boost the defence of Pokrovsk.

As a secondary effort, Russian forces launched smaller attacks on the town of Selydove, just south of Novohrodivka, and other areas of the Donetsk region in what became known as the Battle of Toretsk, a renewed effort to capture parts of the Donetsk region and an attempt to outflank the contested town of Chasiv Yar from the south.

In the course of this secondary battle, Russian forces seized on 11<sup>th</sup> August most of the north-western part of the small nearby town of Niu-York and, with it, the last parts of the defence line in the Donbas controlled by Ukraine since the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022. The aim was to fix the Ukrainian reserves and prevent them from moving towards the Pokrovsk area to reinforce their defence. However, in early September, the military

---

<sup>75</sup> SEGURA, Christian. «El regimiento estrella de Ucrania queda bajo mínimos por la falta de armamento y los errores propios», *EL PAÍS*, 22 Abril 2024.

<sup>76</sup> «The Fall of Prohres A New Russian Breakthrough Threatens Ukraine's Supply Lines at the Most Vulnerable Part of the Front», *Meduza*, 26 Julio 2024.

<sup>77</sup> ABISHEV, Ilya. «Russia Pushes on Key Ukraine City of Pokrovsk While Kyiv's Kursk Incursion Slows», *BBC*, 31 Agosto 2024.

situation in Niu-York improved significantly for Ukraine after the Azov Brigade managed to break the siege of Niu-York and recapture part of the city<sup>78</sup>.

At the same time, the Russian command changed tactics, reverting to those used earlier in the war by the Wagner mercenary group. Ukrainian units began to face waves of Russian infantry attempting to assault their positions, with complete disregard for the lives of the soldiers. These so-called "meat grinder" tactics<sup>79</sup> proved highly costly for the Russian forces in terms of casualties, but also for the Ukrainian forces, whose reserves were quickly depleted as they were forced to defend themselves against the constant attacks.

On the other hand, the Russians made moderate use of armoured vehicles, which made it difficult for Ukrainian tanks and artillery to hit important targets. Russia also intensified the use of powerful and lethal FAB-1500 glide bombs, which forced Ukrainian forces to disperse their units when shelling began and sometimes even to withdraw them from the front line.

Of the Ukrainians, it may be said that they were favoured in this battle of attrition when it came to the balance of casualties. Maintaining a prepared defence has always been easier and less costly in material resources and manpower than offensive action. Ukraine was able to devise and execute a clever strategy of slowly bleeding Russia's offensive power in exchange for losing small portions of its territory. It may not have been a particularly bold or novel approach, but it was effective.

This expanded strategy with an extensive use of drones and missiles slowly increased Russian costs of sustaining the war, while offering Ukraine the opportunity to reconstitute its depleted military force. The entry into force of a new mobilisation law<sup>80</sup> passed in May 2024, which reduced the age of recruitment from 27 to 25, allowed for an additional 50,000 recruits, far short of the 400,000 initially estimated, but sufficient to prepare for the strategic surprise attack that took place in August in the Kursk region.

---

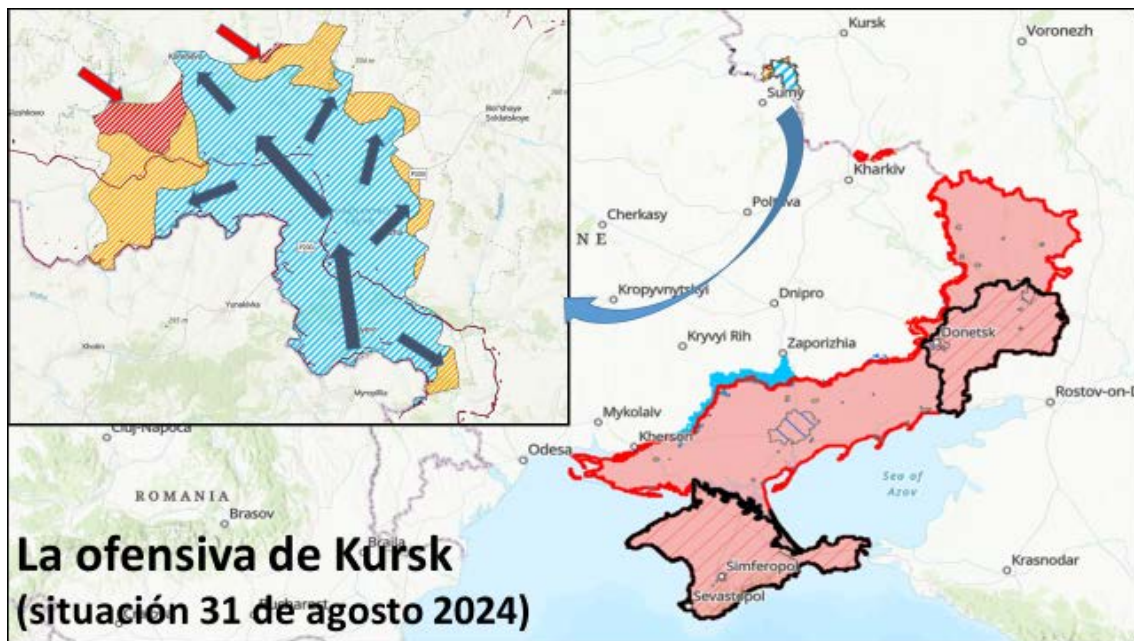
<sup>78</sup> "Azov Fighters Retake a Part of the Eastern Town of Niu York", *Kyiv Post*, 6 September 2024.

<sup>79</sup> BOCIURKIW, Michael. "How the battle for Bakhmut exposed Russia's 'meat-grinder'", *CNN*, 14 April 2023.

<sup>80</sup> MOENCH Mallory. "Ukraine's Controversial New Plan to Enlist More Soldiers", *Time magazine*, 10 April 2024.

## Ukraine's reaction. The "Second Battle of Kursk"

Ukraine's military strategy changed dramatically in early August. While the Russians were advancing along the Ocheretyne ridge line towards Pokrovsk, as well as on other secondary fronts such as Vuhledar and Kostiantynivka, the Ukrainians had been stealthily preparing a counter-offensive at Kursk. This is the place where the Russians would least expect it and a region of great symbolic character, given that the largest tank battle of the Second World War had taken place there.



Source: Author's own based on the ISW map.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

Consequently, on 6<sup>th</sup> August, Ukraine launched a bold offensive using surprise and speed to evade Russian defensive lines, in what may be considered the first armed incident since World War II on Russian territory. The raid, dubbed the "second battle of Kursk"<sup>81</sup>, in reference to the 1943 battle in the same region, caught Russia off guard. The quality of the forces contributed decisively to this impact, as unlike the failed counter-offensive of 2023, which employed newly created brigades, the Ukrainians used combat-hardened formations for this operation. The incursion was launched with at least two brigades of Ukrainian regular forces composed of mechanised, highly mobile forces and protected by substantial air defence.

<sup>81</sup> «Ukraine surprises with a high-stakes raid into Russia», *The Economist*, 8 Agosto 2024.

The Russians initially attempted to send reinforcements, which were countered by High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) attacks, which destroyed the Russian columns as they moved towards their entry positions. The Russian Command's poor response highlighted the inability of its military leadership to manage dynamic situations and the rigidity of its command and control structures to efficiently coordinate an eventual reaction to such incursions.

The surprise offensive in the Russian border region of Kursk seemed to signal an attempt by Ukraine to change the tempo of the war, at a time when the Russian army seemed unstoppable in its advance towards Pokrovsk, while maintaining offensive pressure on Kharkov. The aim was to reduce, at the operational level, Russia's ability to channel more troops to the main front at Pokrovsk by having to man a new front. Although they did not rule it out, given the limited means employed, it was unlikely that the Ukrainians would seriously consider "taking Kursk, or holding vast tracts of Russian territory"<sup>82</sup>.

At the strategic level, Kyiv sought to create a "security zone" on Russian territory that would allow it to come to any negotiating table to end the war on favourable terms, or at least to do so in a position to avoid an unfavourable agreement that would include compromising Ukraine's sovereignty or taking unacceptable territorial losses.

The Ukrainian military gamble was therefore a very risky one. While it is traditionally accepted that surprise accompanied by a high level of mobility is essential in any military operation to create or exploit breaches in enemy defences, it is also accepted that mechanised operations require a greater logistical burden than actions carried out by troops on foot. They are also difficult to conceal in open warfare, which makes them particularly vulnerable.

The offensive initially achieved objectives that were probably higher than the Ukrainian command had estimated. In the following days, its mechanised and motorised units were able to penetrate Russian territory through at least two axes of advance and occupy and consolidate a pocket of some 1500 km<sup>2</sup>, taking hundreds of Russian soldiers as prisoners. Ukraine's operational audacity surprised everyone and its initial success showed that the battlefield was far from transparent, and that deception, good use of intelligence and the

---

<sup>82</sup> JOCHECOVÁ, Ketrin; POSANER, Joshua; NÖSTLINGER, Nette; CIENSKI, Jan. «Russia declares state of emergency in Kursk as Ukraine pushes incursion», *POLITICO*, 8 Agosto 2024.

achievement of surprise remain fundamental elements of offensive manoeuvres in modern warfare.

The Ukrainian command hoped that the offensive would force the Russians to reconsider their force deployments elsewhere along the front line. The Russians would have to respond to the Ukrainian attack on Kursk by ceasing attacks elsewhere. In doing so, they would become vulnerable during troop movements from the south, given Ukrainian superiority in precision weapons such as the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), or the fearsome 300-kilometre range surface-to-surface ballistic missiles (ATACMS) built by Lockheed Martin.

The reality is that this did not happen. Overcoming the surprise, Russia was able to contain the Ukrainian offensive with aviation, drones and a minimal commitment of troops from the newly created North Military Group covering Belgorod, Kursk and Bryansk<sup>83</sup> and the two additional reserve armies from the Dnieper axis<sup>84</sup>. Russia was maintaining the offensive momentum in Pokrovsk, without undue concern for the Kursk clean-up.

Russia's avoidance of deploying combat-experienced front-line units to Kursk indicated the Russian Command's confidence in the limited scope of the raid, which it saw more in its propaganda value to domestic and international public opinion than in its ability to reach relevant targets. This Russian assessment proved to be correct, as no strategic objective was conquered, not even the Kursk nuclear power plant 60 kilometres from the Ukrainian border, which was at all times well beyond the line of contact between armies. The most that Ukrainian forces managed to do was to capture the key Sudzha gas metering substation that supplies Europe with Russian gas<sup>85</sup>.

Nor did the Ukrainian incursion succeed in stopping, or slowing, the pace of the Russian advance in the direction of Pokrovsk, so that by early September, when the Ukrainian momentum had been exhausted, Russian forces were within 10 km of Pokrovsk, while reinforcing their envelopment manoeuvre on the nearby town of Vuhledar. The reality is that the Ukrainian incursion had a limited operational impact on the Russian army's operations, without being able to change the course of the war at the strategic level.

---

<sup>83</sup> «Russia Forms New 'North' Military Group in Regions Bordering Ukraine», *kyivpost*, 15 Abril 2024.

<sup>84</sup> FAULCONBRIDGE. Guy. «Russia Says It Is Pushing Ukrainian Forces Back, Will Create Two New Armies», *Reuters*, 20 Marzo 2024.

<sup>85</sup> ARIS, Ben. «LONG READ: Is the Kursk Incursion a Major Strategic Blunder?», *MSN*, 24 Agosto 2024.

More important was Ukraine's success at the political level in changing the narrative about the war and countering Russian disinformation about its "inevitable victory"<sup>86</sup>. The Kursk offensive not only surprised the world, but changed perceptions regarding Ukraine's ability to take the initiative in the war. It resulted in a significant reinforcement of the West's focus on the need to continue to support Ukraine, which it believed still had a chance of victory.

The Ukrainian incursion into the Kursk region showed that the war in Ukraine was not stagnant, but highly active, and has demonstrated that both Ukraine and Russia have the capacity to make decisions that have a significant impact on the battlefield realities at any given moment, and certainly also on the final outcome of the conflict.

However, narratives only work if they are accompanied by facts that are sustained over time; if not, their impact is short-lived. As the saying goes, "math over myth". While it is not yet clear what the ultimate fate of the Kursk ridge will be, or to what extent Ukraine will be able to hold it, it seems clear that the objectives of this offensive are less ambitious and more limited in scope than in the previous Ukrainian offensives of 2022 and 2023. The short-term impossibility of linking the Kursk incursion to the overall battle in Donbas and the difficulty of making sufficient military gains to substantially alter the course of the war indicates that the offensive was most likely conceived as an operation of opportunity rather than a decisive battle, something at which the Ukrainians have proven to be masters.

Military strategy is always a matter of choice. Sowing chaos at a particular time and in a particular place may serve to create new opportunities to be capitalised on by the Ukrainian armed forces. Ultimately, however, the success of the Kursk incursion is conditioned by the small size of the troops that Ukraine can commit and the limitations of its logistical chain. This raises serious questions about the timing of the Ukrainian diversionary operation and the wisdom of the decision to launch an offensive in Kursk.

If Ukraine had focused on the defence in Donetsk, it would have had a good chance of exhausting the Russian offensive centred on the seizure of Pokrovsk, while solving recruitment problems and stabilising the front lines before the onset of winter. The new

---

<sup>86</sup> SHAPIRO, Jeffrey Scott. "Ukraine's inevitable victory will embolden U.S. and free world", *The Washington Times*, 6 May 2024.

soldiers recruited during the spring could have been used to create new brigades and reinforce those holding the front lines, while weapons provided by the West and new Ukrainian designs, especially in the field of drones, would have served to stop the Russian offensive, or at least slow it down at a very high cost to Russia.

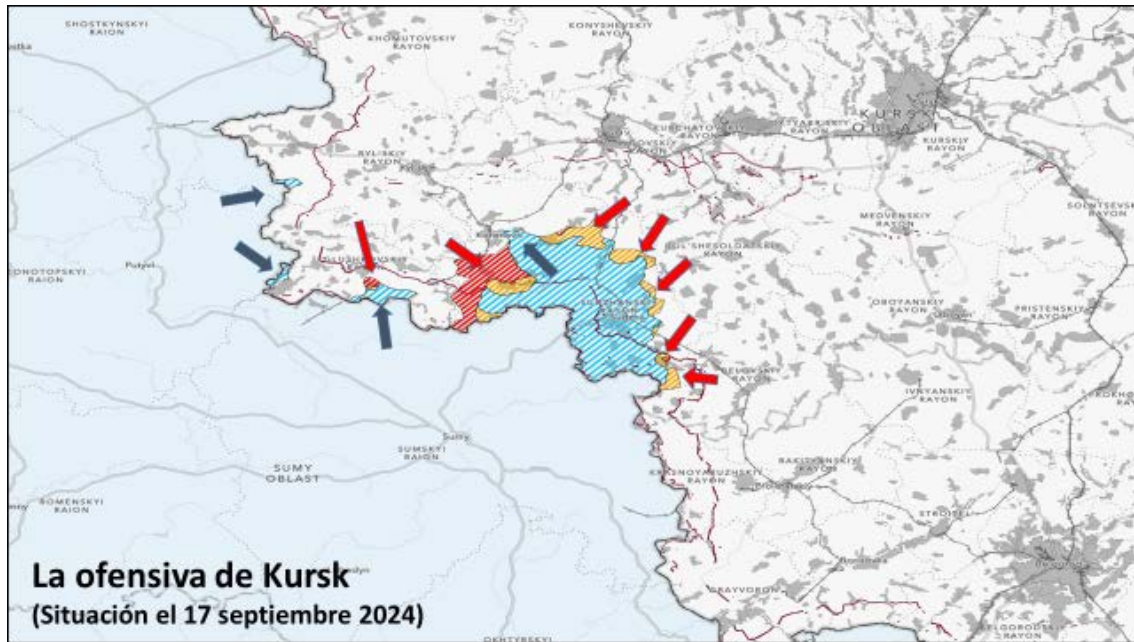
Thus, even if Ukraine had lost territory, it would surely have been able to save some of the threatened cities and gain time to relieve its depleted frontline units, reorganise its operational structures, and build up forces for an eventual offensive in 2025. This option is no longer possible and it is likely that, in the end, the Ukrainian Armed Forces will end up ceding their entrance into Russian territory, either due to Russian military pressure or due to the need to reinforce other priority areas. This might happen mainly in the Pokrovsk region, a key city whose loss would be a serious blow to Ukrainian aspirations to retain the part of Donetsk they still control.

Ukraine will have to minimise the impact of Russia's continued offensive on Pokrovsk, while concentrating its efforts on holding the Kursk foothold, a double military effort that may prove excessive. However, it may not achieve either, and even the pendulum of public opinion and international support may swing in the opposite direction if the news from the front is a constant drumbeat of lost territories, cities and towns.

Nor should we underestimate the considerable military effort required for Ukraine to maintain Kursk. By mid-September 2024, its defence required no fewer than five mechanised brigades (22<sup>nd</sup>, 54<sup>th</sup>, 61<sup>st</sup>, 88<sup>th</sup>, 116<sup>th</sup>), a territorial defence brigade (103<sup>rd</sup>), two Air Assault Brigades (80<sup>th</sup> and 82<sup>nd</sup>) and a variety of battalions of various types, making a total of twelve Brigades<sup>87</sup>. Although these were not full units, but improvised units to create a strike force of 7,000 to 12,000 men, they were built up at the cost of draining men and materials from the rest of the front and drawing on reserves.

---

<sup>87</sup> ARIS, Ben. "LONG READ: Is the Kursk incursion a major strategic blunder?", *IntelliNews*, 2024.



Source: Author's own based on the ISW map.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

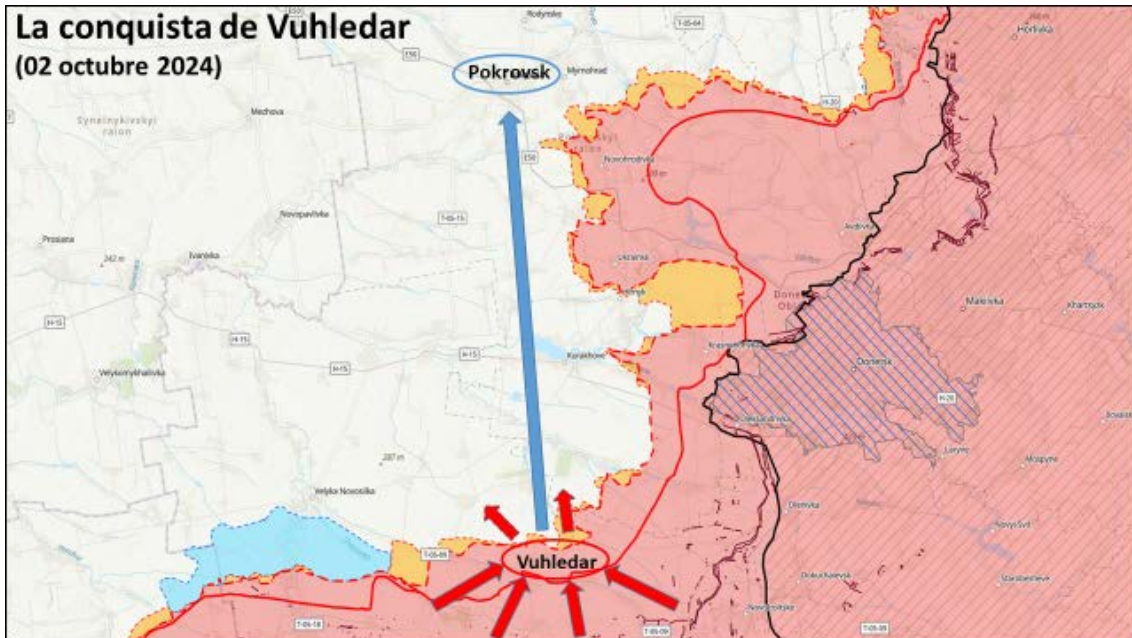
The irony of the Kursk offensive is that if the main objective was to relieve pressure on Ukrainian defenders in the Pokrovsk region, the exact opposite has happened, as Ukrainian troops are now under pressure in this region. In this main theatre of operations, Ukrainian defences have been weakened by troop shortages and have serious problems holding the defensive line in the face of the Russian push.

Ultimately, the Kursk offensive has not served to correct the current imbalance of forces in the war and has only diluted Ukrainian forces at a time when they need to be concentrated. Russia retains a considerable advantage in troops, equipment and ammunition, which has allowed it to continue its advance uninterrupted, making the situation increasingly difficult for the Ukrainian armed forces on several parts of the front. Russian forces continue to push back Ukrainian lines along several axes from Vuhledar to Pokrovsk, from Toretsk to Chasiv Yar and near Kupiansk, and it is likely that the city of Pokrovsk will eventually fall into Russian hands, facilitating their advance into western Donetsk. The fall of this city would give Russia eventual control of almost the entire Donetsk Oblast and bring the end of the war closer on favourable terms for Russia<sup>88</sup>.

On the other hand, Russian units have captured most of Niu-York, advanced towards Toretsk and Pokrovsk, which is the main Russian target, is within artillery range.

<sup>88</sup> «The Kremlin is close to crushing Pokrovsk, a vital Ukrainian town», *The Economist*, 22 Agosto 2024.

Moreover, the Russians have recently occupied the town of Vuhledar, a fortified town situated on commanding terrain at the intersection between the eastern and southern fronts and 50 km southeast of the city of Pokrovsk. Although Moscow's seizure of Vuhledar is unlikely to decisively alter the course of offensive operations in the western Donetsk region, mainly because Vuhledar is not a particularly crucial logistical node<sup>89</sup>, the fall of this city has strong symbolism given that it had held the front line for more than two years. Operationally, it will help Russia improve its logistics and move towards Pokrovsk before the rains intensify and the muddy terrain becomes too difficult for movement. If they fail to do so, the Russians will probably prefer to wait for the arrival of winter to consolidate the ground.



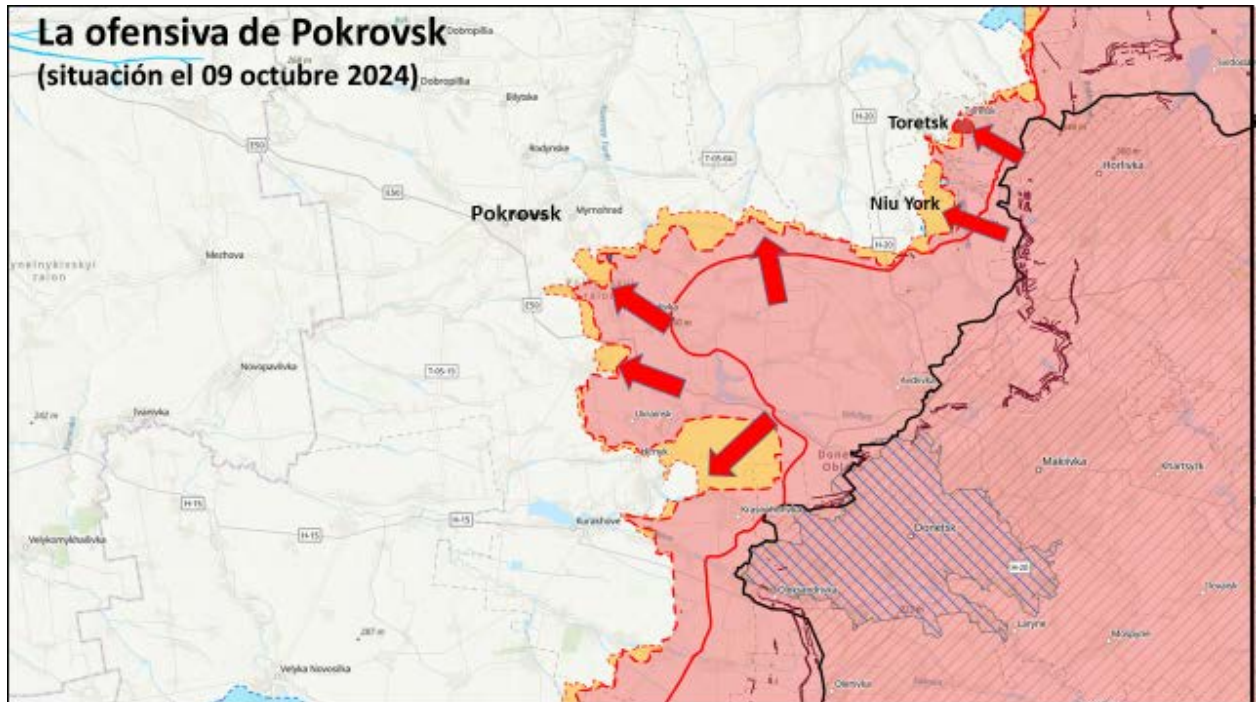
Source: Author's own based on the ISW map.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

It may be argued that, despite Ukrainian attempts, Russian offensive efforts have not diminished; indeed, they have intensified in recent times, as if they sense that the possibility of a ceasefire is getting closer and they will try to reach it in the best possible situation. The question is to what extent does Russia retain sufficient forces to maintain offensive pressure along the front line and take Pokrovsk, while building up forces to eliminate the Kursk foothold.

<sup>89</sup> VAKULINA, Sasha. "The fall of Vuhledar: Ukrainian forces withdraw after two and a half years of fighting". *Euronews*, 02 October 2024.

Taken together, Russia's advances have enabled it to occupy more than 1,500 square kilometres of Ukrainian territory from October 2023 to September 2024, more than reversing the Ukrainian army's hard-won gains of last year. The amount of territory captured by Russian troops between May and September would be almost double what the Ukrainian army regained at great cost in terms of lives and military hardware with its summer offensive a year ago<sup>90</sup>.



Source: Author's own based on the ISW map.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

Meanwhile, the fact that Ukrainian forces are digging in at Kursk, having exhausted their offensive momentum, indicates the possibility that the region is becoming the scene of another battle of attrition, perhaps less gruelling than the previous ones, which will end the moment the Russian command decides to finish off the Ukrainian troops holed up there. Kyiv is running out of options and will have to decide to what extent it is able to invest its limited military resources in sustaining the Kursk operation, while trying to slow the Russian advance in Donetsk at an acceptable rate of loss.

Zelenskyy's government has signalled its intention to maintain the entrance as a security space within Russia and as a key bargaining chip in the eventual peace talks, which

<sup>90</sup> MILLER, Christopher. "Russia's advances expose 'cracks' in Ukraine's defences", *Financial Times*, 7 August 2024.

means that Ukrainian forces are there to stay and will surely stay until the end. This is a dangerous gamble for Ukraine, which could find itself in a worst-case scenario. This would be the case if the Russians take Pokrovsk and advance rapidly to the west, without the Ukrainians having sufficient reserves to stop them, and for Russian forces to simultaneously eliminate the Kursk foothold. If this were to happen, Ukraine would be placed in a position of great military and political weakness, as it would lose its main bargaining chip.

The outcome of the military confrontation in Kursk, which is not yet over, however remains to be seen. The Russians may be following the example of the Napoleonic invasions of 1812, when Prince Mikhail Kutuzov simply waited for the vastness of Russia, the strategic patience of the Russian army, and the freezing winters to do their work.

Another option for Russia is simply to maintain constant pressure on the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the Kursk region to gradually reduce the foothold and wait for the autumn rains, which will turn the fields into seas of mud, to finish it off. Like Napoleon, the Ukrainian forces in Kursk have long supply lines and will struggle to resupply as the weather worsens. The short time they have had to fortify themselves has left them highly exposed to brutal attacks by Russian missile systems and drones. By contrast, Russia's armed forces are garrisoned and supplied at their own bases and need only keep up the pressure and wait for favourable circumstances to finish off the Kursk foothold.

Beyond the Kursk offensive and the situation on the Donbas front, the biggest problem facing Ukraine in the coming months is to survive the campaign of Russian attacks on its energy grid<sup>91</sup>. Ukraine faces an uncertain winter, and what it needs most now are power generators and increased air defence capabilities to protect its population and economy. Although measures have been put in place to alleviate the situation, the country is likely to face major power outages this winter, which will have an impact on the morale of the population and their willingness to sustain the war effort.

As the saying goes, "it never rains but it pours". In addition to the military problems arising from the difficult situation on the battlefield, there were also financial and social problems. Ukraine faces a budget deficit of more than 11 billion euros, which is expected to increase

---

<sup>91</sup> MILLER, Christopher. «'Hell. Just hell': Ukraine and Russia's war of attrition over Bakhmut», *Financial Times*, 9 Diciembre 2022.

to around 12 billion euros by 2025<sup>92</sup>. Even if international aid increases, the economic downturn will mean higher taxes and higher inflation, further impacting living standards. With social unrest growing due to the harsh measures Ukraine will have to adopt, the risks of populism and public disaffection towards the government are likely to increase, further complicating its military situation.

### **Predictions regarding the future of the war in Ukraine**

Russia is making slow but steady progress in Ukraine, in its third year of conflict, and time is not on Ukraine's side. Its military situation on the ground is increasingly difficult and the pressure for a diplomatic solution is mounting, understandably at a time when Western countries are increasingly reluctant to shell out large sums of money to shore up its economy and strengthen its military capabilities. Europe and the United States provided 185 billion euros of funding between January 2022 and June 2024, with another 100 billion euros still to be allocated<sup>93</sup>.

These huge sums of money have been used to finance the war, but not to win it. Moreover, the approval of a \$61 billion US aid package on 20<sup>th</sup> April has proved insufficient to reverse the situation on the ground<sup>94</sup> and it is becoming increasingly clear that it will not be possible to do so without increasing arms deliveries and lifting restrictions on their use, especially medium and long-range missiles.

---

<sup>92</sup> SVITLYK, Daria. "Ukraine may face \$15 billion budget gap next year, PM Shmyhal says", *The Kyiv Independent*, 27 August 2024.

<sup>93</sup> JAKUB, Parusinski. Opinion: "The harsh truth behind Ukraine's peace prospects", *Kyiv Independent*, 19 September 2024.

<sup>94</sup> ARIS Ben. « US passes Ukraine aid package: what now?», *bne IntelliNews*, 21 April 2024.



Source: Author's own based on the ISW map.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

A factor that would certainly boost such a decision, but which would also serve to prolong the war, is the anticipated future availability of arms for Ukraine. By early 2025, Western production capacity will have ramped up enough to supply Ukrainian forces with sufficient quantities of artillery shells. U.S. plants are on track to produce 80,000 shells per month by the end of 2024 and 100,000 shells per month sometime in 2025. Add that to the 100,000 or more shells per month that European industry is expected to produce by late 2025 and Ukraine could not just maintain its defensive positions, which requires an estimated 75,000 shells per month, but also initiate offensive action"<sup>95</sup>.

To reverse the military situation, Ukraine needs artillery, armoured tanks and air capabilities to enable it to strike military targets inside Russia, such as military bases, ammunition and fuel depots, and military and civilian factories in an economy that Russia has geared to the war effort. Lifting restrictions on the use of Western weapons would give Kyiv the opportunity to degrade the Russian armed forces, undermine their combat morale and prevent large-scale attacks on Ukrainian cities and infrastructure. But it would

<sup>95</sup> GRYGIEL, Jakub. "The Right Way to Quickly End the War in Ukraine2, *Foreign Affairs*, 25 July 2024.

also carry great risks, not least that of escalating the conflict and dragging European and US allies into an all-out war, most likely a nuclear one.

This apocalyptic scenario is causing nightmares in many Western governments and much of their public opinion. It remains to be seen whether, when in 2025 the United States has decided its future after the presidential election and begins to increase production of artillery shells, there will be sufficient political consensus that deliveries to Ukraine will be sufficient to meet battlefield requirements, as well as cover the air defence Ukraine needs to protect its cities<sup>96</sup>.

For its part, with its troops advancing on several fronts, Russia believes it is winning, therefore, within a context it deems to be favourable, it is not likely to accept any kind of peace negotiations with Ukraine on terms that are not close to capitulation. Its strategy of attrition employed to maximise enemy casualties, while taking casualties of its own, is something that Russia, with its larger population and economic and military resources, can afford in the long run, but Ukraine cannot. Moscow can rely on its war economy to maintain military momentum and has no need to negotiate as long as it is confident that it can bleed Ukraine into surrendering and survive the embargo and Western support for Kyiv.

In this favourable military situation, Russia could reach an agreement with Ukraine similar to the 'Black Sea Grain Initiative' of 2022, where both countries negotiated and signed in Turkey - supervised by the UN - agreements with multilateral partners, but not with each other. This possibility of a ceasefire agreement would be acceptable to Ukraine, according to President Zelenskyy's own statement to the magazine *Político*<sup>97</sup>.

New Western proposals for a potential negotiated agreement between the two sides must also be understood in the same vein, where Russia would retain de facto but not de jure control over the territory it currently occupies; in return, Ukraine would receive sufficient security guarantees over the rest. It is not a question of recognising Russia's sovereignty over the one-fifth of Ukrainian territory it controls, as this would be against the international legal order and unfair to a Ukraine that has given its all on the battlefields,

---

<sup>96</sup> SCHROEDER, Peter. «Putin Will Never Give Up in Ukraine», *Foreign Affairs*, 3 Septiembre 2024.

<sup>97</sup> MELKOZEROVA, Veronika. "Ukraine wants peace talks in wake of Russia incursion, but not directly with Putin", *Politico*, 19 August 2024.

but a tacit acceptance that these lands will have to be recovered in the future by diplomatic means.

It is not an easy solution in the midst of a brutal war, but as NATO's latest Secretary Jens Stoltenberg says, "There are ways to solve that"<sup>98</sup>. This would follow the precedent of other controversial situations such as the security guarantees provided by the US to Japan, which do not cover the four Kuril Islands that Japan claims as its own and which are administered by Russia after the Soviet Union occupied them in 1945.

It is therefore not impossible to achieve something resembling a ceasefire, especially for Russia, which, with the war against Ukraine unfolding on favourable terms, is determined to continue it until Kyiv gives in to its claims to regain the 2014 borders and agrees to negotiate on its own terms. This Russian position is strengthened as their forces advance in the Donbas, and will be further strengthened if they manage to take the key city of Pokrovsk and, with it, almost total control of the region.

This option has so far been unacceptable to Ukraine; but it is possible that dwindling Western military support, public fatigue and the war's own unfavourable drift will eventually push Kyiv to change its mind. In the end, as Stoltenberg himself acknowledges, "When there is a will, there are ways to find a solution. But it will be necessary to define the line, from which Article 5 is invoked and to allow Ukraine to control the whole territory up to that border"<sup>99</sup>.

What is clear is that, if Ukraine wants to defeat Russia militarily, it will have to do much more than hold Kursk as a bargaining chip and halt its westward advance into the Donbas. It must expand attacks inside Russia and deplete, assuming it can sustain the war effort, Russia's offensive potential including attacks this winter against critical Ukrainian facilities. Kyiv needs to look for creative and asymmetric ways to increase pressure on an enemy that has proven to be very resilient, which would translate into lifting the famous 'red lines' on the use of Western long-range weapons systems.

Accepting it would mean ending the US policy of "escalation management" of deliberately refraining from supplying Ukraine with more powerful weapons in sufficient quantities to allow it to gain a strategic advantage in the war, fearing that this might force Russia to

---

<sup>98</sup> FOY, Henry. "Former Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg: 'So far, we have called Putin's bluff'" *Financial Times*, 04 October 2024.

<sup>99</sup> HALL, Ben. "Ukraine, Nato membership and the West Germany model". *Financial Time*. 03 October 2024.

attack NATO. This strategy has proven particularly ineffective in exploiting Russia's weaknesses. By introducing new weapons slowly, publicly and on a small scale, their impact on the battlefield has been limited by giving Russia time to adapt.

The "victory plan" presented at the end of September in New York by President Zelenskyy is oriented in this direction of escalating the conflict with his strategy to improve his country's position prior to any peace negotiations with Russia. In addition to more financial assistance and a less than credible - given the reluctance of many allies - formal NATO invitation for Ukraine to join the military alliance, the key request is that Western allies who have supplied missiles allow Ukraine to launch them into Russia, a permission that the Americans have so far failed to grant<sup>100</sup>.

None of these demands are new and are in line with what Ukraine has been asking for a long time. Ukraine remains determined to prolong the war over time, even if the current state of operations does not bode well for the outcome. Ukraine remains convinced that the only possible option for a victory over Russia is to extend the conflict to the friendly Western bloc, so that the US and its European allies agree to directly challenge Russia by sending in troops. This is a penultimate red line - the last would be nuclear - which none of them are, at this stage, willing to cross, and certainly not with public opinion whose support for the war is increasingly limited<sup>101</sup>.

As Ukrainian President Zelenskyy continues to push for Western approval to use long-range missiles, President Putin has been quick to change Russia's nuclear doctrine by stating that a conventional attack by any non-nuclear nation, with the support of a nuclear power, that "poses a "critical threat to our sovereignty" will be seen as a joint attack against Russia<sup>102</sup>. This threat seems to indicate that Russia would be willing to significantly lower the threshold for the potential use of Russia's nuclear arsenal if the West allows Ukraine to attack Russia with longer-range weapons. For Moscow to do so would mean that NATO would technically place itself at war with Russia.

---

<sup>100</sup> MÉHEUT, Constant. "What Is Zelensky's 'Victory Plan' for Ukraine's War With Russia?", *The New York Times*, 25 September 2024.

<sup>101</sup> O'HANLON, Michael; STELZENMÜLLER, Constanze; WESSEL, David. "Five charts track wobbly support for Ukraine in the U.S. and E.U.", *The Washington Post*, 25 October 2023.

<sup>102</sup> "Russia significantly lowers threshold for possible use of nuclear arsenal", *Euronews with AP*, 25 September 2024.

Many analysts in the West think of Russia as a "corrupt, retrograde and nihilistic power"<sup>103</sup>, but few deny that it remains a formidable power whose power projection capabilities should not be underestimated mainly because they have not substantially diminished and its military, almost three years after the invasion, has become a fearsome instrument of war. Even if Russia runs out of soldiers, money, tanks and missiles by mid- or late 2025, or even 2026, Ukraine will need to survive until then, which is not guaranteed.

Underestimating Russia has proven to be the wrong strategy. The magical thinking, widespread in the West, that Russia was a 'colossus with feet of clay' that could be defeated on the battlefield and whose economy would collapse under sanctions and not withstand the war effort, was one of the main causes of the failure of the Ukrainian offensive in the summer of 2023 and the Russian successes in 2024. Even at the naval level, the Ukrainians may have been able to sink part of Russia's Black Sea fleet, but as a recent report by the British think tank *Chatham House* notes, with some exceptions, most of the ships destroyed were "old and limited" and the Russian fleet "has lost none of its open water combat capabilities"<sup>104</sup>.

## Conclusions

Many lessons can be drawn from the war in Ukraine, but what is clear is that the restriction of arms supplies at critical moments in battles and the imposition of red lines has proved devastating for Ukraine. The Country has endured enormous suffering in order to fight - in a way that is politically acceptable to the West - a Russia that lacks restraint in the use of military force.

Both sides are exhausted, but Ukraine more so, though not enough to move from low-level discussions - such as a prisoner swap - to broader issues of a ceasefire or an agreement on nuclear security. The gulf between them is too wide and both sides are entrenched in the hope that the other will eventually give in.

---

<sup>103</sup> HOCKSTADER, Lee; "The losing Strategy of underestimating Russia", *The Washington Post*, 19 September 2024.

<sup>104</sup> BOULEGUE, Mathieu; BRONK, Justin; HIRD, Karolina; KERR, Jaelyn; LEE, Rob; Michael, PETERSEN B. "Assessing Russian plans for military regeneration", *Chatham House*, 9 July 2024.

It remains Kyiv's ambition to defeat Russia, but its terrible human and material losses and the depletion of its population and armed forces mean that regaining the borders on the terms of 2014 has most likely become a 'bridge too far' for Ukrainian aspirations. After all, this is a brutal war of attrition, and such a war is usually won by the side that is able to put the last soldier on the battlefield. Given the numbers, if current conditions continue, it will surely be a Russian victory.

Ukraine is tenaciously clinging to the alternative of ending all restrictions on the use of military force. But if the few remaining red lines were to fall one after the other, the Cossack nation would be dangerously heading towards absolute war, free of the moderating effects imposed by politics and society and without the practical constraints of time turned into an "as long as it takes", and space into a "whatever it takes". Thus, a decision to end all restrictions would lead to military escalation and, almost inevitably, an all-out war between Ukraine and Russia, with unpredictable consequences. After all, history offers no example of a nuclear military power being decisively defeated by a non-nuclear one.

In the end, beyond the war, Ukraine will have to assume a more realistic and less ambitious definition of what it means by military victory and seek some way to come to a reasonable understanding with Russia, knowing that there is no simple answer to the questions presented by such a complex nation. Abandoning the absolute view that geopolitical problems with Russia can only be resolved on the battlefield will require Ukraine to limit its military expectations and settle for the more modest goals of holding as much territory as possible in the Donbas and degrading Russian military power to the extent that they are able.

In his "History of War", John Keegan explains how "in the post-primitive world, human ingenuity broke through the restrictions imposed on war"<sup>105</sup> allowing it to go beyond all permissible limits to become what Clausewitz defined as "an act of violence pushed to the utmost limit". Avoiding such extremes in Ukraine will depend, beyond military results, on the decisions to be taken in the West and fundamentally in Washington after the presidential elections in November. But it seems clear is that, without the moderating

---

<sup>105</sup> KEEGAN, John. "Historia de la guerra", *Planeta publishing house*, 1995. P.458.

habits of diplomacy and negotiation, Ukraine is on the road to all-out war in the magical thinking that, by lifting restrictions on the use of violence, Russia will eventually collapse.

*Ignacio Fuente Cobo\**  
Colonel (Artillery). Senior Analyst