

Russian offensive underway in Ukraine as war destabilizes the entire region

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A week short of the one-year anniversary of the NATO-US war against Russia in Ukraine, there are growing indications that a Russian offensive is already under way as the war increasingly destabilizes the entire region.

In an interview with the BBC on Thursday, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said, "Russian attacks are already happening from several directions." Zelensky again rejected out of hand any territorial concessions to Moscow, including the Crimean peninsula in the Black Sea, which has been claimed by Russia since 2014, and other territories in East Ukraine now occupied by Russian forces.

On Wednesday, UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told the BBC, "We now estimate 97% of the whole Russian army is in Ukraine." Since an order for a partial mobilization in early September, the response by the Kremlin to a series of catastrophic setbacks in the war, 300,000 Russian men were drafted into the army. After several months in which most of them were kept in the rear and underwent basic training, it now seems that a large portion of them have been sent to the front, with media discussions in Russia suggesting that a renewed mobilization drive may be coming soon.

According to the British *Telegraph*, heavy fighting has been reported from almost the entire front line on the border of the Russian-held territories in East Ukraine over the past 48 hours. Following months of intense fighting, Russian forces, including the paramilitary Wagner group, which is composed of mercenaries, appear to be on the verge of taking Bakhmut, and have also launched repeated assaults on Vuhledar. Both are relatively small towns, located in the Donetsk region. *Al Jazeera* described this week as "the toughest yet" for the Ukrainian army on the front in East Ukraine.

The fighting, which has so far resulted in little substantial movement of the front lines, is coming at a horrifying cost for both sides. Ukrainian and NATO officials have claimed, with some glee, that Russia is losing hundreds of men every day with some units having been entirely destroyed.

Losses on the Ukrainian side, however, are also estimated to be extremely high, with hundreds believed to be dying

every day, out of a much smaller population. At least 8 million Ukrainians have fled the country since the beginning of the war, out of a pre-war population of just under 40 million (as opposed to Russia's 140 million). Several millions of those who remain are now living in Russian-controlled territories.

In November, nine months into the war, US Chief of Staff Chairman Mark Milley estimated that both sides had suffered 100,000 casualties each since the beginning of the war. Now, over three months later, this already horrific figure must have risen further very substantially.

Amid these catastrophic losses and the collapse of the economy—about a third of the working age population in Ukraine is now unemployed—the state of the Ukrainian military is highly precarious and the government has been plagued by intense crisis.

The *Washington Post* reported this week that US officials objected to Zelensky's prioritization of the defense of Bakhmut, writing, "American military analysts and planners have argued that it is unrealistic to simultaneously defend Bakhmut and launch a spring counteroffensive to retake what the United States views as more critical territory."

The principal response by NATO to the crisis of its proxy military forces in Ukraine has been to further escalate its involvement and arms deliveries.

Over the past six weeks, NATO has moved with lightning speed to send hundreds of battle tanks to Ukraine and is now openly discussing sending F-16 fighter jets as well.

Earlier this week, NATO officials pledged to "ramp up" arms production for what they called a "grinding war of attrition." A US official told the *Financial Times* this past week, "The Russian land forces are pretty depleted so it's the best indication that they will turn this into an air fight. If the Ukrainians are going to survive ... they need to have as many air defence capabilities and as much ammunition ... as possible." According to the newspaper, Russia has been massing aircraft along the border with Ukraine with over 80 percent of its air force still intact.

As the working class in the imperialist countries have been

subjected to further assaults on its living standards, the 30 NATO members have pledged at least \$80.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine over the past year, according to the latest figures of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

With a further escalation under way, the war is already destabilizing the entire region, threatening to ever more directly draw in neighboring countries. Belarus, which borders Ukraine to the north and Russia to the west, completed major joint military exercises with Russia involving all Belarusian military airfields on February 1. Belarus also continues to host Russian troops on its territory.

So far, the government of Alexander Lukashenko, the last remaining ally of the Putin regime in Eastern Europe, has refrained from openly joining the war. Before leaving for a meeting with Putin in Moscow on Friday, Lukashenko stated that there was “no way” he would send troops to Ukraine unless Belarus was attacked. In that case, he said, he was “ready to wage war, alongside the Russians, from the territory of Belarus. ... don’t forget Russia is our ally, legally, morally and politically.”

In Moldova, a country of 2.6 million, which is sandwiched between Ukraine and NATO-member Romania, a major political and social crisis has erupted in the shadow of the war.

From the very beginning, Moldova has been heavily affected by the war. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have fled to Moldova and missile debris from the war regularly lands on Moldovan territory. Since the fall, Moldova has also been suffering significant energy outages as the country is closely tied to Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, which is regularly knocked out by Russian missile strikes. In the fall, large-scale protests over soaring costs of living shook the government.

The small country has long been one of the main geopolitical flashpoints in the conflict between NATO and Russia in Eastern Europe. Like Ukraine, Moldova was part of the Soviet Union until its destruction in 1991 by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Amidst the break-up of the Soviet Union, a war between Russian-backed separatist forces in the Transnistria region, bordering Ukraine, and the Moldovan central authorities erupted in November 1990. The war ended in 1992 in a ceasefire, but the status of Transnistria was never resolved. While Transnistria claims independence and is backed by Russia, it is still internationally recognized as part of Moldova. Russia has 1,500 troops stationed in Transnistria.

A central component of the temporary settlement of the conflict was that Moldova’s military neutrality was enshrined in the country’s 1994 constitution.

However, since the beginning of the war, the government

under the pro-EU President Maia Sandu, a former World Bank official, has moved to abandon this official position of neutrality, and has openly taken the side of NATO and Ukraine in the war. In June, Moldova was granted EU candidate status alongside Ukraine. In January, Sandu told *Politico* that her government was having “serious discussion on our capacity to defend ourselves, whether we can do it ourselves, or whether we should be part of a larger alliance”—a clear hint at NATO, even though she avoided mentioning the name. The Kremlin has repeatedly warned Moldova of aligning openly with NATO.

Moldovan troops already regularly exercise side by side with NATO forces and take part in the NATO mission in Kosovo. For 2023, the Sandu government ramped up military spending by 50 percent, while aggressively clamping down on democratic rights, including by shutting down oppositional news outlets and TV channels.

On Monday, Sandu declared that Moldovan intelligence agencies had uncovered a “plot by Moscow” to “topple” her government, with the involvement of pro-Russian Moldovan oligarchs and opposition figures. Without providing any evidence, Sandu claimed that the aim of the “plot” was to install a government “which would put our country at the disposal of Russia, in order to stop the European integration process.” She further alleged that Russia sought to use Moldova in the war in Ukraine and said, “The Kremlin’s attempts to bring violence to our country will not succeed.” A day later, on Tuesday, the Moldovan authorities temporarily closed the country’s airspace, claiming that a balloon-like object had crossed the border.

Sandu’s allegations of a “Russian plot” came just four days after President Volodymyr Zelensky declared that his intelligence services had “intercepted the plan of the destruction of Moldova by the Russian intelligence.”

Sandu’s former security adviser, Dorin Recean, who has spearheaded the turn toward an alignment with NATO, was sworn in as the new prime minister on Thursday, following the sudden resignation of his predecessor the week prior.



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