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‘The Russian Army Won’t Stop at Donbas’: Pro-Kremlin Groups Hail Advances in Ukraine

By James Beardsworth

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A Russian sapper clears mines from a road in the occupied Ukrainian city of Mariupol. **Vladimir Gerdo / TASS**

Moscow-backed separatists announced the capture Friday of the strategic Ukrainian town of Lyman as the gathering pace of a Russian advance in eastern Ukraine was cheered on by pro-Kremlin online groups.

The claim followed days of intense fighting in Lyman, which lies on a road leading to the major eastern Ukrainian cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.

Unverified footage released earlier this week showed the Russian flag being raised over a local government building.

Moscow's forces have been making steady gains in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and

Luhansk in recent days, according to Ukrainian officials, sparking fears that Russian troops will soon be able to achieve the encirclement of large Ukrainian towns including Lysychansk and Severodonetsk.

Russian soldiers stormed a hotel in the northeast part of Severodonetsk, Luhansk region governor Serhei Haidai tweeted Friday.

The reports of military advances and newly-captured territory in eastern Ukraine have delivered a rare boost to those who support Russia's military campaign, leading to a sense of victory among pro-Kremlin bloggers and those loyal to Moscow.

"Perhaps now we are witnessing a turning point in the war," the administrator of pro-Kremlin telegram channel Voenny Osvedomitel, which has 451,000 subscribers, told The Moscow Times. "After the loss of Donbas, the Ukrainian army may finally start to crumble."

While Ukraine controlled 10% of Luhansk region just over a week ago, that figure is now about 5%, Haidai said Thursday. "It is clear that our boys are slowly retreating to more fortified positions - we need to hold back this horde."

Videos of Ukrainian forces retreating westward and ferocious Russian bombardments were widely shared online this week.

In particular, Russia has positioned a large number of troops and equipment around the village of Popasna, where it recently achieved a breakthrough, attempting to maximize its firepower in a small sector of the front.

By concentrating its forces in this way, Russia has been able to make some territorial gains, according to Robert Bell, a former NATO official and professor at Georgia Tech Institute.

Russian troops are currently reported to be fighting both east and west out of Popasna, attempting to encircle Ukrainian forces in the city of Severodonetsk.

If they were successful, a battle for Severodonetsk would likely look like "Mariupol on a smaller scale," according to Nikolaus von Twickel, a former OSCE staff member who researches the Donbas region.

Thousands of civilians were killed in the bloody and destructive Russian siege of Mariupol, a Ukrainian port city, which finally fell earlier this month.

The seizure of Severodonetsk would give Russia almost complete control of the Luhansk region, one of the objectives set by the Kremlin when Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops over the Ukrainian border in late February.

Supporters of the Kremlin's "special military operation" have taken to social media in recent days to voice a sense of optimism for a continued Russian advance.

"Most likely the Russian army won't stop at Donbas," said the Voenny Osvedomitel administrator, who declined to give a name.

“No matter how much the other side tells us they’ve killed Russian special forces, paratroopers and marines, and Chechens, and all the elite units of DNR and LNR - look what we see now?” writer and extreme nationalist Zakhar Prilepin posted on Telegram.

After a bungled attempt to take Kyiv in the early days of the war, Russia was forced to scale-down its ambitions in Ukraine, regrouping its forces in the east in what looks like an attempt to capture the Donbas region in its entirety.

The Ukrainian army is taking serious casualties and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Sunday that up to 100 Ukrainian soldiers were dying every day.

“The Russian army has been trying to wear the Ukrainians down for three months now, so they’re must be some toll taken on the Ukrainian army,” said analyst Bell.

The Russian Armed Forces have the upper hand in terms of momentum on the battlefield, according to Oleksiy Arestovych, a Ukrainian presidential adviser.

“We have now lost to the Russian army in terms of pace. The Russian side managed to accumulate reserves earlier than we did,” Arestovych said Wednesday in an interview with YouTube show "Feygin LIVE".

While the Ukrainian side expects the situation to improve in the long-run, Arestovych stressed that Ukrainian forces have a difficult month ahead as they wait to be reinforced with Western weaponry and new recruits.

Russian troops will likely move quickly to capitalize on Ukraine’s weakness, analysts said.

“Russian forces may need to conduct a ground offensive on Severodonetsk in upcoming days to maintain their pace,” said a report published Wednesday by the Institute for the Study of War, a U.S. think tank.

A battle for control of Severedonestk would likely be costly for both sides, according to Bell, who predicted that a Russian victory in the eastern Ukrainian city would mean Ukraine had to “pull its forces back, and consolidate their lines.”

While these gains may deliver a boost to Russian troops, and lift morale among war supporters in Russia, Bell said they should not be overstated when assessing the overall course of the fighting.

“Ukraine may be forced to give up incrementally more territory in Luhansk, but, even then, that’s a long way from being the decisive battle of the war,” said Bell.

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