

Putin Hails a 'Positive Dynamic' for His Troops in Ukraine

By [AFP](#)

January 15, 2023



Sergei Bobylev / TASS

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday praised his forces after their claimed capture of a Ukraine town and in the wake of a missile strike that killed 23 people in a tower block.

The taking of Soledar in eastern Ukraine, a salt-mining outpost home to 10,000 before the conflict, was hailed as a major success by Moscow after months of humiliating setbacks on the battlefield.

"There is a positive dynamic, everything is developing according to plans," Putin said, in an interview broadcasted Sunday. "I hope that our fighters will please us more than once again."

Russia's Defense Ministry announced this week that it had "completed the liberation" of Soledar.

This could be a key gain as Russian forces push towards what has been their main target since

October — the nearby transport crossroads of Bakhmut.

Ukraine denied the claims and said heavy fighting continued in Soledar.

On Sunday, the US-based Institute for the Study of War said that "Ukrainian forces are highly unlikely to still hold positions within the settlement of Soledar itself."

Rivalries in Soledar

Both sides have conceded heavy losses in the battle for the town, where Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin insists his forces spearheaded the offensive.

The Russian Defense Ministry initially made no mention of Wagner when it claimed victory, only later praising the "bravery" of Wagner's troops in Soledar.

The nod was an unusual recognition of the controversial force following talk of infighting and rivalry between Wagner and the official military.

Late Saturday, Prigozhin praised his mercenaries in a veiled jab at Russian army command, which has been criticized for poor coordination and being too far removed from the ground.

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Prigozhin attributed Wagner's victories to a "perfected system of command."

"Everyone can express his opinion," Prigozhin claimed, "but once a decision has been taken, all tasks are fulfilled. It is our group's strictest discipline that gives us these possibilities."

Wagner, which has been accused of abuses in the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Syria and Ukraine, has recruited thousands of convicts to fight in Ukraine.

Strikes on Ukraine

This comes as Ukraine was still reeling Sunday from what was a 12th wave of large-scale attacks on energy infrastructure in recent months.

On Sunday, operator Ukrenergo said energy infrastructure was "being restored" but that the attacks had "increased the energy deficit."

"The period of outages may increase," it acknowledged.

The Russian army said it targeted "the military command and related energy facilities... all targets were reached."

But Ukrainian officials denounced Russian "terror" after a tower block was hit during a massive wave of strikes that caused power outages across the country.

At least 23 people were killed and 72 others wounded in the attack on the Dnipro tower block, the city council said.

A 15-year-old girl was among the dead, officials said, after dozens of people were pulled from the rubble, including a woman brought out by rescuers on Sunday.

43 people are still missing, the council said.

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The Ukrainian army said the block was hit by an X-22 Russian missile that it lacked the capacity to shoot down.

"Only anti-aircraft missile systems, which in the future may be provided to Ukraine by Western partners... are capable of intercepting these air targets," it said.

British tanks

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Saturday pleaded for more Western military weapons, saying that Russian "terror" could be stopped only on the battlefield.

"What is needed for this? Those weapons that are in the warehouses of our partners," Zelensky said.

On Saturday, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledged to provide Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine, the first Western country to supply the heavy tanks Kyiv has been demanding.

The tanks would arrive in Ukraine in the coming weeks, Downing Street said, adding that Britain would also train the Ukrainian Armed Forces on how to use them.

Russia's embassy in Britain warned that "bringing tanks to the conflict zone... will only serve to intensify combat operations, generating more casualties, including among the civilian population."

Moldova, Ukraine's southwestern neighbor, said it had found Russian missile debris on its territory after Saturday's strikes.

"Russia's brutal war against Ukraine directly impacts Moldova again," President Maia Sandu tweeted, posting photographs of the wreckage.

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