

Zelensky Expects Russian Offensive in Northeast Ukraine To Intensify

By [AFP](#)

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President Volodymyr Zelensky poses prior to an interview with AFP at the Presidential Office in Kyiv on May 17 amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. **Roman Pilipey / AFP**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told AFP in an exclusive interview he expects Russia to step up its offensive in the northeast and warned Kyiv only has a quarter of the air defenses it needs to hold the front line.

Russian forces, which had made only moderate advances in recent months, launched a surprise assault in the Kharkiv region on May 10 that has resulted in their biggest territorial gains in a year and a half.

Zelensky said Russian troops managed to advance between five to 10 kilometers along the northeastern border before being stopped by Ukrainian forces, but added that the region could be the "first wave" in a wider offensive.

"I won't say it's a great success [for Russia] but we have to be sober and understand that they are going deeper into our territory," he said, speaking from Kyiv on Friday in his first interview with foreign media since the offensive began.

Zelensky said the situation in the Kharkiv region has been "controlled" but "not stabilized."

He doubled down on pleas to allies to send more air defense and fighter jets to combat Russia's air superiority as the war grinds through its third year.

"Today, we have about 25% of what we need to defend Ukraine. I'm talking about air defense," he said.

Ukraine needs "120 to 130" F-16 fighter jets or other advanced aircraft to achieve air "parity" with Russia, Zelensky said.

Kharkiv assault

Russian President Vladimir Putin said during a trip to China this week the northeastern offensive was in retaliation for Ukraine's shelling of border regions and that Moscow was trying to create a "security zone."

Russian forces have taken 278 square kilometers between May 9 and 15, their biggest gains since the end of 2022, AFP calculated using data from the Institute for the Study of War.

Related article: [Putin Says 'No Plans' to Take Kharkiv, Blames Ukraine for New Offensive](#)

Russia said Saturday it had seized another village in the Kharkiv region.

Ukraine's defense forces said they "were focusing their main efforts on preventing the Russian occupants from advancing."

Ukraine has evacuated almost 10,000 people from the northeast border area since Russia launched the assault.

Ukrainian officials have accused Russian soldiers in the eastern town of Vovchansk of capturing dozens of civilians to use as "human shields" to defend their command headquarters — a claim AFP was not able to immediately verify.

Two civilians — aged 70 and 83 — were killed when trying to leave Vovchansk by car, the Kharkiv regional prosecutor said.

"The battle in the area of Vovchansk is ongoing," Ukraine's armed defenses said.

Mobilisation age lowered

Putin said there was no intention at this stage to take Kharkiv, Ukraine's second city, about 30 kilometers from the border. More than 1 million people still live there.

With no end to the war in sight, Ukraine's army is struggling to recruit, while fighters are

growing exhausted and angry at the lack of rotation.

Zelensky acknowledged issues with staffing and "morale" within Ukraine's often outgunned and outnumbered ranks, and signed a mobilization law that came into force on Saturday.

"We need to staff the reserves... A large number of [brigades] are empty," Zelensky told AFP.

Many Ukrainian soldiers have been fighting for more than two years without the possibility of being discharged.

Kyiv has lowered the age at which men can be drafted from 27 to 25 and tightened punishments for those who avoid being called up.

It also required that all persons liable for military service, conscripts and reservists aged 18 to 60 update their military registration.

To facilitate the process — usually involving long lines at the military centers — it created an online registration system where more than 150,000 people had logged in on Saturday morning.

Lawmakers have scrapped a proposal to grant soldiers who have served for more than 36 months the option to be discharged.

'Nonsense situation'

Ukraine's strongest allies, the Baltic states and Poland, have grown nervous that Russia may try to attack them.

Poland announced it would spend \$2.5 billion to fortify its eastern border, which includes Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

As other Western allies press for a quick end to the war, Zelensky insisted Ukraine is still playing the long game.

"The West wants the war to end. Period. As soon as possible. And, for them, this is a fair peace," he said.

He pushed his allies to take a firmer approach to Russia, including by allowing his armed forces to strike into Russian territory with Western weapons.

"We are in a nonsense situation where the West is afraid that Russia will lose the war. And it does not want Ukraine to lose it," Zelensky said.

But Russia said its air defenses on Saturday destroyed French-made guided bombs and U.S.-made anti-radar missiles over the western Belgorod region that borders Ukraine.

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