The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Likely Is a Fresh Russian Offensive on Ukraine's Sumy Region?

By Bashir Kitachayev

March 21, 2025

Firefighters trucks parked near a damaged hospital building following a strike in Krasnopillya, Sumy region after Russian shelling. **State Emergency Service of Ukraine**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky claimed this week that Russia is readying a new attack on Ukraine's Sumy region, which borders Russia's Kursk region.

His statement came as Moscow's army continued to push back against Ukrainian troops in Kursk, where they have controlled territory since launching a surprise offensive on the Russian border region more than seven months ago.

As Ukrainian forces continue to lose ground in Kursk, the Kremlin may indeed be preparing a new attack in this direction. While the potential objectives remain unclear, some analysts suggest Russia could attack Sumy to force Kyiv to divert resources to a new front and weaken Kyiv's position in peace talks.

On March 12, Ukrainian forces withdrew from Sudzha, the largest Kursk region population center they had controlled, and retreated to Sumy. Only small areas near the Russian-Ukrainian border appear to remain under Kyiv's control.

Russian authorities have framed the retaking of Kursk region territory as a significant victory more than three years into a war that was initially expected to be won in a matter of days.

During a visit to the Kursk region last week, President Vladimir Putin proposed establishing a so-called "buffer zone" in the Sumy region to safeguard Kursk from future attacks.

Following his statement, reports emerged of a potential Russian offensive in this direction. Russian troops have already carried out minor incursions into the Sumy region earlier this month, seemingly aimed at bringing key supply roads under fire control.

Ukrainian troops have also previously reported the presence of small reconnaissance and sabotage groups in the border area, but there have so far been no reports of significant breakthroughs.

Amid Ukraine's retreat from Kursk, Ukrainian analyst Oleksiy Hetman claimed that Russia has deployed additional units, including mechanized brigades and artillery batteries, along the border in preparation for a major offensive.

"Currently, the forces stationed there include airborne, air assault and marine units. Most likely, they will try to advance toward Sumy and enter our territory from the north. Whether they succeed or not is another question. But they will make attempts," Hetman said on Sunday.

However, Ukrainian military analyst Ivan Stupak argued that neither Ukrainian intelligence nor open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysts have observed signs of preparation for a large-scale invasion of Sumy.

"At the moment, no one can say that somewhere deep inside Russian territory, Moscow has assembled a 200,000-strong military group and that an invasion will start tomorrow," Stupak told The Moscow Times. "The question of what exactly Zelensky meant remains debatable. As of now, there is no confirmation of his claims about an impending invasion."

Meanwhile, new clashes have been reported in the border areas. On Tuesday, pro-Russian military Telegram channels reported an attempted incursion by Ukrainian forces from Sumy into Russia's Belgorod region, which neighbors Kursk.

Russia's Defense Ministry later confirmed the purported offensive in Belgorod and claimed it had been repelled.

Russian military Telegram channels have also shared numerous videos of drone strikes targeting Ukrainian military equipment.

The attacking forces likely include Ukrainian troops who previously retreated from Kursk, as indicated by distinctive markings on their armored vehicles. However, these attacks have not yet led to significant results.

"In this part of Belgorod region, there are no important targets for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The terrain is mostly empty — fields and forests," Russian military analyst Yan Matveev said on his Telegram channel.

"I still believe this is a diversionary maneuver by Ukraine. Perhaps they expected the border to be as poorly defended as before, hoping to break deep into the region and force the Russian army to redeploy significant forces from Kursk. But, as we see, the operation failed," Matveev said.

Stupak suggested that the attack on Belgorod may have been aimed at diverting Russia's attention from Sumy. He noted that the Russian troop contingent along the Kursk-Sumy border could number up to 60,000, though most of these forces are engaged in logistics and support roles.

According to Stupak, a potential Russian offensive on Sumy would seek to tie up Ukrainian forces already struggling with manpower shortages, inflict further damage on Ukraine, and push deeper into its territory. He argues that even a small portion of Sumy under Russian control could be used as a bargaining chip in future peace negotiations.

"They will try to hold the territory, create occupation administrations, attempt to incorporate it into Russia and use it as another trump card in political bargaining," he said.

At the same time, Ukraine appears to have reinforced its defenses in Sumy.

In March 2024, Ukraine's Defense Ministry reported the construction of concrete shelters for military personnel, anti-tank barriers and trenches. The exact location and scale of these fortifications have not been disclosed.

A Ukrainian soldier involved in the construction told the TSN news outlet that fortifications are often built further inland rather than near the border due to difficult terrain and Russian attacks on construction equipment.

Related article: Putin Urges Ukrainian Troops in Kursk Region to Surrender

On May 10, 2024, Russian troops attacked Ukraine's Kharkiv region, which borders Sumy, and captured part of its territory. Ukraine had also built fortifications there, but some remained unfinished, drawing criticism from the Ukrainian public.

"Fortifications are Ukraine's weak spot. We've been making the same mistakes for three years. Either they build them in the right place but poorly, or they build them well but in the wrong location, or the concrete fortifications turn out to be too thin. Information about fortifications is classified. We can only hope they exist in Sumy," Stupak said.

This is not the first time Russia has set its sights on Ukraine's Sumy region. Moscow's troops pushed into the region during the early weeks of its full-scale invasion in February 2022. But despite initial successes, Russian forces failed to establish control due to Ukrainian resistance, and the Kremlin was forced to withdraw by early April 2022 as part of its broader retreat from northern Ukraine.

Stupak noted that if Russia launches another offensive on Sumy, it will face a well-prepared Ukrainian force with intelligence support, including from Washington, which recently resumed intelligence sharing with Kyiv.

Unlike in 2022, large-scale movements of armored vehicles are now nearly impossible, as massive columns have become easy targets for drones.

"Drones have changed the nature of warfare: they create ‘kill zones’ where anything that moves is instantly destroyed. Ukraine has learned from 2022 when Russian forces advanced through Sumy, so that scenario will not happen again," Stupak said.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/03/21/how-likely-is-a-fresh-russian-offensive-on-ukraines-sumy-region-a88431