

Ukraine's Top Commander Says War Has Hit a 'Stalemate'

By ANDREW E. KRAMER, Constant Méheut · The New York Times · 6 min

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Ukraine's top commander has acknowledged that his forces are locked in a "stalemate" with Russia along a front line that has barely shifted despite months of fierce fighting, and that no significant breakthrough was imminent. It is the most candid assessment so far by a leading Ukrainian official of the military's stalled counteroffensive.

“Just like in the First World War we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate,” the commander, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, told *The Economist* in an interview published on Wednesday. “There will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough.”

His comments marked the first time a top Ukrainian commander said the fighting had reached an impasse, although General Zaluzhny added that breaking the deadlock could require technological advances to achieve air superiority and increase the effectiveness of artillery fire. He added that Russian forces, too, are incapable of advancing.

The general said modern technology and precision weapons on both sides were preventing troops from breaching enemy lines, including the expansive use of drones, and the ability to jam drones. He called for advances in electronic warfare as a way to break the deadlock.

“We need to ride the power embedded in new technologies,” he said.

The general also said he underestimated Russia's willingness to sacrifice troops in order to prevent a breakthrough and prolong the war. “That was my mistake,” he said. “Russia has lost at least 150,000 dead. In any other country such casualties would have stopped the war.” His accounting of Russia's casualties could not be independently verified.

His remarks come at a particularly fraught time for Ukraine in its 20-month battle against invading Russian forces. Western-supplied weapons have not enabled Ukraine to push through Russian defenses, and there are few weapons left that can make a difference. The willingness of Western allies to sustain support for Ukraine is ebbing, including in the United States, where some Republicans in the House are balking at providing more aid.

Ukrainian officials are also worried that the war between Israel in Hamas will both divert the West's attention from Ukraine and siphon off weapons supplies that could be used in the fight against Russia.

While Ukraine was able to drive Russian forces out of nearly half of the land they seized in their initial invasion in a series of counteroffensives — surprising many military analysts — the general said “the war at the present stage is gradually moving to a positional form” where both sides can pin each other down. He provided his assessment in a nine-page essay published alongside the interview, noting the need to find “a way out.”

The Kremlin's spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, said on Thursday that the war was “not in a stalemate” and that Russian troops would continue to press forward on the battlefield.

General Zaluzhny's comments came amid a wider effort by Ukrainian officials to temper allies' expectations of rapid battlefield success, while urging them to maintain military support to allow Ukraine to gain the advantage on the battlefield. On Tuesday, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine said that the outside world was "accustomed to success" and complained that Ukrainian troops' achievements were "perceived as a given."

While it was not laid out specifically in the general's article, the assessment that the war had shifted to "positional" fighting suggested an acknowledgment that Ukraine's counteroffensive has wound down without achieving its objectives, said Col. Roman Kostenko, the chairman of the defense and intelligence committee in Ukraine's Parliament.

This had been the conclusion of military analysts for some time without being a stated position of the government in Kyiv. Ukraine is still on the offensive in the south, Mr. Kostenko said, but advancing slowly. The article, he said, "opened eyes and showed society that victory will not come tomorrow."

The article, Mr. Kostenko said, should also signal to the ministry of defense, which is responsible for procuring weaponry, that its focus on obtaining heavy arms including tanks and artillery is less significant than seeking new technologies and precision weaponry. Already, he said,

Ukraine's military destroys more Russian artillery pieces and armored vehicle with drones than with artillery.

In his interview and essay, General Zaluzhny pointed out that the standoff was largely the result of technological parity on the battlefield, with both sides using modern sensors to detect troops and equipment, and advanced weapons to destroy them.

He said he understood the new state of the fighting after visiting the front line in Avdiivka, a Ukrainian city in the east that has faced repeated Russian assaults for several weeks. The use of artillery and drones enables each side to wear down the enemy, tie them up and target advancing troops.

“The simple fact is that we see everything the enemy is doing and they see everything we are doing,” he wrote.

General Zaluzhny said the effectiveness of Western-supplied weapons had diminished because they use GPS navigation technology that is vulnerable to Russian communications jamming systems.

Electronic warfare is a hidden hand behind much of the war, with Russian abilities outmatching those of the Ukrainians. Russian forces can detect cellphone signals and jam GPS and radio frequencies. Ukraine fields its own electronic warfare systems but its soldiers frequently complain that Russia consistently has the upper hand in this area.

This means that Ukrainian formations are increasingly isolated as they try to fight in an environment where their radios are sometimes next to useless.

Faced with Russian jamming, Ukrainian troops are often unable to mass and attack in large numbers because coordination between infantry, tanks and artillery support is so difficult without functioning communication gear.

Russian units face similar issues because of Ukrainian jamming, though it is unclear how widespread and systemic they are given Ukraine's more limited abilities.

Kyiv's southern counteroffensive, launched five months ago and carrying the hope that Ukrainian troops could split Russian forces in the south, appears to have all but stalled. Ukrainian forces have been unable to breach formidable layers of Russian defensive positions.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies calculated in a recent analysis that, until late August, Ukrainian troops advanced an average of about 90 meters per day during their southern push.

“It's a tactical blockage,” said Thibault Fouillet, the deputy director of the French Foundation for Strategic Research, noting that Russian and Ukrainian troops were mutually canceling each other's air and ground capabilities. “The front line has had time to freeze.”

Reacting to General Zaluzhny's comments, Mr. Peskov said the sooner Kyiv realizes that Ukraine's victory is out of sight, "the earlier new prospects will open" up.

It was unclear what he was referring to. The Kremlin has long suggested that peace could be achieved if Ukraine agreed to cede territory to Russia, but there is no sign that either side is prepared to talk about a negotiated settlement. General Zaluzhny expressed exactly that fear — that his forces would be drawn into a bloody trench war similar to World War I, which could last for years and in which Russia, thanks to the sheer mass of its army, could have an advantage.

"Ukraine's armed forces need key military capabilities and technologies to break out of this kind of war," he said in his essay. That includes the huge use of drones and more advanced artillery weapons to break through Russia's air defense systems, as well as jamming devices to prevent Russia from flying its own drones.

Ukraine long lobbied the West to obtain F-16 fighter jets, which are expected to enter the battlefield sometime next year. But General Zaluzhny appeared to indicate that they would be less helpful in this new phase of the war than they could have been earlier, as Russia has improved its air defense capabilities.

Marc Santora contributed reporting from Odesa, Ukraine, Thomas Gibbons-Neff from Mykolaiv, Ukraine, and Ivan Nechepurenko from Tbilisi, Georgia.



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