

Conflict Update # 316

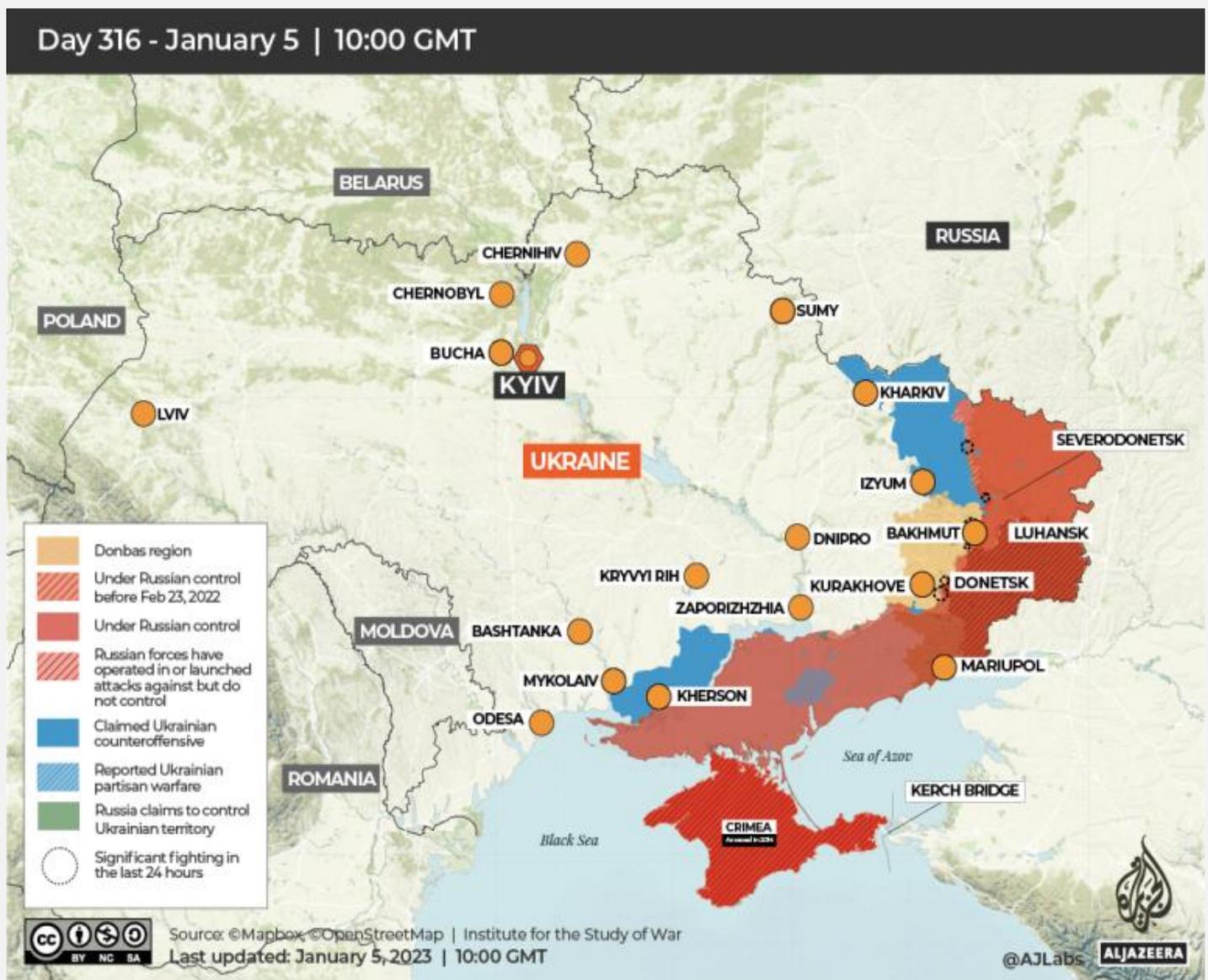
January 5th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 109,720 (810) soldiers killed, 3,041 (+3) enemy tanks, 6,108 (+2) armored combat vehicles, 2,051 (+12) artillery systems, 426 (+2) MLRS systems, 215 (+0) air defense systems, 284 (+1) warplanes, 271 (+1) helicopters, 1,844 (+2) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 723 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,759 (+14) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 182 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Ukraine military says it killed 800 Russian soldiers in past day - Ukraine's military estimated on Thursday (5 January) that 800 Russian soldiers were killed in the past day, mostly in fighting in the eastern Donetsk region, while Western allies pledged supplies of armoured battle vehicles but not the tanks Ukraine wants.

Giving its regular morning roundup of the fighting, Ukraine's military said Russian forces were focused on an offensive in the Bakhmut sector and its attacks in the Avdiivka and Kupiansk sectors were unsuccessful.

It said more than 800 Russian soldiers, one aircraft, a helicopter and three tanks were destroyed over the past day.

It also reported an unspecified number of civilian casualties as a result of Russian air, missile and rocket attacks on the largely ruined, Ukrainian-held city of Bakhmut and two other cities in the Donetsk region – Kostiantynivka and Kurakhove.

Mourning, finger-pointing in Russia after scores killed in Makiyivka rocket strike - At around midnight on New Year's Eve, the building was struck by HIMARS rockets launched by Ukrainian forces that, according to Russia's Defense Ministry, killed 89 soldiers. Some Russian sources have claimed "hundreds" died, and Kyiv claims some 400 Russian soldiers perished or were wounded in the barrage.

The wife of a soldier from Samara who was housed in the building told RFE/RL's North.Realities that her husband survived due to being away from the site at the time of the strike, but says from around 400 soldiers stationed there, "most of them died."

Another soldier's wife told North.Realities her husband gave her a gruesome description of how he "miraculously survived" after running out of the building after the first of four rockets struck. Russia's Defense Ministry also reported four rockets struck the building, while two were shot down.

Russia's military leadership blamed the soldiers themselves for giving away their location through "massive use of mobile phones by military personnel in defiance of prohibitions." However, the wife of a soldier who was housed in the building told Russian media outlet Important Stories that locals "breathed poison" on the servicemen during their time in Makiyivka and it's possible residents gave away their location to Ukrainian intelligence.

Some in Russia have noted that the large concentration of unprotected soldiers were housed just 11 kilometers from the current front line around Avdiivka, within easy range of various artillery systems. Semyon Pegov, a pro-Kremlin war correspondent, said on Telegram that the Russian military leadership blaming dead soldiers for their own deaths "looks like an outright attempt to spread the blame."

Many of the soldiers killed inside the building were from the Samara region of southwestern Russia.

Top Ukrainian security official sees signs that Russia intends to escalate war - There are signs that Russia is preparing an escalation of the war in Ukraine in February, the secretary of Ukraine's Security Council, Oleksiy Danilov, said on January 4, a day after Ukrainian President Zelenskyy said that Russia was planning to call up more troops for a major new offensive.

"There are many signs that give us reason to say that they may have another attempt in February," Danilov said on Ukrainian national television.

Danilov said one of the signs is the increased activity of Dmitry Kozak, Putin's deputy chief of staff, who has been holding meetings in Europe in order to force Ukraine to sign peace agreements.

Danilov said Ukraine "will not go for it."

Kyiv has been saying for weeks that Putin plans to order another mass mobilization and shut his borders to prevent men from escaping the draft.

"We have no doubt that the current masters of Russia will throw everything they have left and everyone they can round up to try to turn the tide of the war and at least delay their defeat," Zelenskiy said in his nightly video address on January 3.

"We have to disrupt this Russian scenario.... Any attempt at their new offensive must fail," he said.

Ukraine 'marshalling' troops for next major offensive: Here's when and where Kyiv could strike - As Russian strikes against Ukraine continue relentlessly and peace hopes seem to fade, a growing number of experts say the war may soon reach a crucial turning point.

"Ukraine is marshalling and holding back troops and ammunition for a new major attack on Russian positions", said Peter Dickinson, Ukraine analyst at the Atlantic Council.

"They've got to maintain the momentum that they've built up: First in September with the capture of the Kharkiv region, and then in November with the liberation of Kherson," he told Euronews.

A new offensive would also be "crucial to maintain the support of the international community and demonstrate that their huge financial and military effort for Ukraine is bringing results."

Former US Army colonel Liam Collins told Euronews that Ukraine needs to stage an attack before snow melts in spring, making unpaved roads harder to use.

"Everybody remembers the flooding in the first stages of Russia's invasion. It's very challenging to conduct an offensive and move troops around in those conditions."

"Ukraine are going to want to stage this attack while the ground is frozen and in favourable state for them".

Collins said that Ukraine can also absorb the stress of fighting in low or sub-zero temperatures much better than the Russians, who have logistics, morale and leadership difficulties instead.

"Those systems have been stressed for the Russians from the onset and weather conditions will only make that harder. The only advantage the Russians have in this conflict is mass."

Attacking down south could split up Russian troops

While many are trying to speculate where the hammer may fall, Kyiv-based Dickinson said that logistics suggests the most obvious place for the offensive would be in the south, straight down to the Azov Sea coast.

"Probably in the region of Berdyansk, perhaps towards Melitopol, to isolate from resupply the Russian forces that head towards Crimea".

He said such an attack would be a much larger version of the Kherson offensive repeated, where the Russian forces were essentially cut off, blockaded and forced to retreat because they couldn't resupply themselves.

Comment – This is what we have been updating for some months now, that Ukraine will advance southwards, and split Russian forces in two. What this simultaneously achieves is a Ukrainian encroachment on Crimea. Should Ukraine succeed in this counteroffensive, then they can control water into Crimea, and cutting it off will force starvation on the population on the peneinsula.

As of now, there is an exodus of Russians back to Rostov-On-Don in Russia, escaping any Ukrainian re-occupation of the island.

Belarus says it is bolstering military grouping with Russia - Belarus says it is continuing to build up a joint military grouping with Russia and is preparing for joint air force exercises with its neighbour and main ally.

The Belarusian defence ministry said in a statement that the goal of creating such a joint force was “strengthening the protection and defence of the Union State (of Russia and Belarus)”.

“Personnel, weapons, military and special equipment of the armed forces of the Russian Federation will continue to arrive in the Republic of Belarus,” the statement said.

The ministry did not disclose the date of the upcoming air force exercises and did not provide any further details.

Russia's hypersonic missile-armed ship to patrol global seas - Putin on Wednesday sent a frigate armed with the country's latest Zircon hypersonic missile on a trans-ocean cruise in a show of force as tensions with the West escalate over the war in Ukraine.

Russia touts that the Zircon missile can evade any Western air defenses by flying at an astounding 7,000 miles per hour (11,265 km/h).

Commissioned in 2018 following long trials, the Admiral Gorshkov is the first ship in the new series of frigates which were designed to replace the aging Soviet-built destroyers as a key strike component of the Russian navy.

Armed with an array of missiles, the ship is 130-meters (427-feet) long and has a crew of about 200.

In 2019, it circled the world oceans on a 35,000-nautical mile journey.

Putin

The race to overthrow Putin and take his Kremlin crown has begun, says former Russian defence minister who warned Moscow is facing 'military catastrophe' - The race to overthrow Putin and take the Kremlin crown is underway, says Russian war analyst and former loyalist Igor Strelkov.

The former FSB colonel said the fight for the 'political Olympus' has already begun amongst those surrounding the Russian president.

Strelkov - who was key to Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014 - is now a staunch critic of the Kremlin's war strategy in Ukraine.

An immediate mass mobilisation of half a million more men is the only way for the Russian president to avoid defeat and humiliation in the war in Ukraine, he claims.

He claimed that Putin crony Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner private army, is already going head to head with allies of the weakening defence minister Sergei Shoigu.

Others believe security allies of ex-FSB head Nikolai Patrushev - secretary of the powerful security council - are more likely to pull the trigger on Putin in a bid to save the elite ruling circle if the war continues to go wrong.

Some claim the security bloc is lining up his son agriculture minister Dmitry Patrushev as the front man for a coup replacing Putin if he is forced out by war setbacks or ill health.

Strelkov sees Prigozhin, once Putin's 'chef' in charge of Kremlin banquets, as aiming to be a major political force in his own right and there is evidence he is now securing prominent coverage in the state media.

There has been speculation he wants to become defence minister - or even president.

'The grouping of Yevgeny Prigozhin stands against groupings which includes Sergei Shoigu,' said Strelkov the former defence minister of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic.

'They have already started the fight. They are not fighting over the number of shells...

'Now we are speaking about what comes after Putin. Will it happen in one year or two? We don't know.

'But factually the fight for the political Olympus has begun between the groupings that surround Putin to the extent that even we can notice it.'

He added that Prigozhin wants to become a 'political actor' and 'is clearly pumping up his authority, including in public'.

Strelkov warned: 'His latest appearances in the media clearly showed that now he positions himself not just like a war commander, but as a public and a political figure...

'Prigozhin stands against the grouping which Shoigu either heads or belongs to. They have already started to fight. It was like a "feudal" battle. The military crisis led to a power crisis,' he said.

'In turn the power crisis will deepen the military crisis. And it'll keep going down the spiral, unless urgent measures I mentioned earlier are taken.'

Predicting another wave of mobilization, he added: 'They will be forced to have it - a second and then perhaps a third wave. To win in Ukraine we would need about half a million more soldiers.'

Telegram channel General SVR claimed Putin has approved plans to call up two million for mobilization this year, with some going to the front as cannon fodder, and others working in military-linked industries.

The first to be called will be men in debt to their ex-wives over alimony payments, it claimed.

Such a move for mass mobilization could come next month.

Strelkov has key support among army and secret services commanders below the top level.

He has so far avoided arrest despite biting criticisms of Putin and his leading henchmen.

Strelkov, 52, a staunchly pro-war blogger, was among three convicted by a Dutch court last year for the downing of a Malaysian Airlines passenger jet in which all 298 on board were killed in 2014.

Despite this, he remains a key voice inside Russia on the conduct of the war.

Putin orders Christmas ceasefire in Ukraine - Putin orders Russian troops to observe a ceasefire in Ukraine over Orthodox Christmas from January 6 to 7.

Kyiv slams the truce proposal as "hypocrisy" and reiterates its call for Russian forces to withdraw from Ukraine.

Here is some of the official wording from Putin's order for a 36-hour ceasefire in Ukraine over Orthodox Christmas.

"Taking into account the appeal of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, I instruct the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation to introduce a ceasefire regime along the entire line of contact of the parties in Ukraine from 12:00 on January 6, 2023 to 24:00 on January 7, 2023," Putin said.

"Proceeding from the fact that a large number of citizens professing Orthodoxy live in the areas of hostilities, we call on the Ukrainian side to declare a ceasefire and allow them to attend services on Christmas Eve, as well as on Christmas Day," he added.

Biden says Putin trying to find ‘oxygen’ with truce proposal - US President Joe Biden said that his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin’s order for a two-day Orthodox Christmas ceasefire in Ukraine was simply an effort to find breathing room for his war effort.

“He was ready to bomb hospitals and nurseries and churches” on December 25 and on New Year’s Day, Biden said, adding: “I think he’s trying to find some oxygen.”

German minister says Ukraine ceasefire will bring ‘neither freedom nor security’ - German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock slammed a ceasefire ordered by Russia in Ukraine and said that if Russian President Vladimir Putin really wanted peace “he would bring his soldiers home.”

“A so-called ceasefire brings neither freedom nor security to people living in daily fear under Russian occupation,” Baerbock wrote on Twitter.

Peace Talks

‘Highly doubtful’ Ukraine will agree to ceasefire: AJ correspondent - Al Jazeera’s Charles Stratford, reporting from Kyiv, says it appears “highly doubtful” that Ukraine will agree to a ceasefire with Russia.

“We haven’t had any official statement yet by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, but one can only assume that it is going to be consistent with what Mykhailo Podolyak said,” Stratford said, citing Zelenskyy’s adviser, who slammed Moscow’s proposed truce as a “hypocrisy.”

“And there’s an interesting change of atmosphere that is gathering pace in Ukraine, in as far as a move away from fundamentally an Orthodox Christmas, because many Ukrainians associate Orthodoxy with Russia and by default Russian aggression,” he added.

Putin says Ukraine must accept loss of territories for there to be dialogue - Putin has told his Turkish counterpart that he is open to talks with Ukraine if Kyiv accepts the “new territorial realities” on the ground.

According to the Kremlin, Putin confirmed to Erdogan during a telephone conversation between the pair that Russia was open “to serious dialogue.”

However, he said this was contingent on Ukraine “fulfilling the well-known and repeatedly voiced requirements of taking into account the new territorial realities.”

Russia moved to unilaterally annex four partly occupied Ukrainian regions – Luhansk and Donetsk in the east, and Kherson and Zaporizhia in the south – in September and has rejected a peace plan put forward by Kyiv which calls for Moscow to respect Ukraine’s territorial integrity and withdraw all of its troops from the country.

Impacts

Ukraine suffers largest post-independence economic slump due to war - Ukraine suffered its sharpest economic decline in over 30 years in 2022 because of the war with Russia, according to official data.

Preliminary economy ministry data published on Thursday showed a 30.4 percent drop in gross domestic product (GDP) last year and economic analysts said risks and uncertainty remain high, especially if Russia continues to attack critical infrastructure throughout the country.

Yulia Svyrydenko, Ukraine’s economy minister, described the decline in GDP as the biggest in any year since Ukraine won independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but said the fall was smaller than expected.

"The successes of Ukraine's defence forces on the front lines, the coordinated work of the government and businesses, the unbreakable spirit of the population and the speed of rebuilding damaged critical infrastructure units, and also systemic financial support from international donors have allowed us to keep up the economic front and continue our movement towards victory," Svyrydenko said.

Iranian attack drone included parts made by 2 Texas companies - Parts made by Austin semiconductor manufacturer NXP and other U.S. and Western companies were found inside an Iranian-made drone Russia used to attack Ukraine last fall, CNN first reported Wednesday.

The big picture: The White House created a task force last month to investigate how the technology, which included U.S. and Western semiconductors, GPS modules and even engines, ended up in Iranian drones.

The Ukrainian intelligence assessment obtained by CNN showed that of the 52 components Ukrainians removed from the drone, 40 appear to have been manufactured by 13 different American companies.

Why it matters: The intelligent assessment is further proof that despite sanctions, Iran is still finding an abundance of commercially available technology, CNN reported.

Zoom in: The drone included parts from two Texas companies — a microprocessor by NXP, a Dutch company with U.S. headquarters in Austin, and nearly two dozen parts built by Dallas-based Texas Instruments, including microcontrollers, voltage regulators and digital signal controllers.

What they're saying: The companies condemned misuse of their technology.

Jacey Zuniga, spokesperson for NXP USA, said in a statement that the company "complies with all applicable export control restrictions and sanctions imposed by the countries in which we operate. Military applications are not a focus area for NXP. As a company, we are vehemently opposed to our products being used for human rights violations."

"TI is not selling any products into Russia, Belarus or Iran," Texas Instruments said in a statement. "TI complies with applicable laws and regulations in the countries where we operate, and partners with law enforcement organizations as necessary and appropriate. Additionally, we do not support or condone the use of our products in applications they weren't designed for."

The intrigue: TI is well known for its calculators, but the company has been building more semiconductor factories in Texas and Utah.

South Korea considers scrapping landmark military pact with North - Seoul slapped North Korea with an "enemy" label in a defense white paper in December. Relations between the Koreas worsened in the spring after the new South Korean government announced a hardline course, and finished out the year at their lowest point in decades amid back-and-forth airspace violations involving drones.

The Republic of Korea may rip up the landmark 2018 military agreement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea if airspace violations involving the use of unmanned aerial vehicles continue, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's press secretary has warned.

"During the meeting, [Yoon] instructed the National Security Office to consider suspending the validity of the September 19 military agreement if North Korea stages another provocation intruding on our territory," presidential spokesman Kim Eun-hye told reporters on Wednesday.

According to Kim, the president also ordered the military to create a new multipurpose drone warfare unit for surveillance, reconnaissance and electronic warfare operations, as well as a "drone killer" for anti-drone missions. Yoon was also said to have asked Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup to create the capability to mass produce small, difficult-to-

detect drones. Two squadrons of drones are already operational as part of the South Korean military's Ground Operations Command. The military plans to spend some \$440 million over the next five years on anti-drone technology, including laser and signal jamming weapons.

The inter-Korean military pact, officially known as the Comprehensive Military Agreement, or CMA, is a landmark treaty signed by the two countries' defense ministers in September 2018 amid what was then the unprecedented warming of ties between Pyongyang and Seoul achieved in negotiations between North Korea's Kim Jong-un and Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in.

Containment

How Elon Musk's satellites have saved Ukraine and changed warfare - A Ukrainian soldier said that Elon Musk's Starlink satellites "changed the war in Ukraine's favour" because they were helping troops stay online amid Russian strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure. The soldier's comments were reported by the British freelance journalist David Patrikarakos, who was reporting from the Ukrainian city of Dnipro.

Every time Oleksiy and his fellow artillerymen hit a Russian target, they have one person to thank: Elon Musk.

Embedded in a frontline hot zone just south of the strategic town of Izyum in Ukraine's war-ravaged east, Oleksiy — who declined to give his last name for security reasons — is now a power-user of Starlink, a satellite communication system owned by Musk's SpaceX.

When planning a counterattack or artillery barrage, he dials up his superiors for last-minute orders via a rectangular white-and-gray Starlink satellite receiver concealed in a shallow pit in the garden of an abandoned cottage. The high-tech equipment is wired to a noisy generator that runs half of the day.

It's not just about military communications. Others in Ukraine's 93rd mechanized brigade let friends and family know they are safe through daily encrypted satellite messages after the local cellphone network was severed weeks ago during heavy shelling.

In their downtime, Oleksiy and his comrades keep tabs on the latest developments in the war via Starlink's internet connection and — when there's a lull between artillery duels — play "Call of Duty" on their smartphones while sheltering in bunkers and standing by for orders.

"Thank you, Elon Musk," said Oleksiy soon after logging on through Starlink's satellites to discover the Biden administration would be sending long-range rockets to the Ukrainian army in its fight with the Russians.

The United States, European Union and other NATO countries have donated billions of dollars in military equipment to Ukraine since the war began in late February. But Musk's Starlink — based on a cluster of table-sized satellites flying as low as 130 miles above Ukraine and beaming down high-speed internet access — has become an unexpected lifeline to the country, both on the battlefield and in the war for public opinion.

Ukrainian drones have relied on Starlink to drop bombs on Russian forward positions. People in besieged cities near the Russian border have stayed in touch with loved ones via the encrypted satellites. Zelenskyy, the country's president, has regularly updated his millions of social media followers on the back of Musk's network, as well as holding Zoom calls with global politicians from U.S. President Joe Biden to French leader Emmanuel Macron.

The Ukrainian troops who held out in the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol were able to maintain contact with their commanders and even Zelenskyy — and conduct live video interviews with journalists — because they had a Starlink system in the besieged factory.

All told, Starlink — and Ukraine’s use of the satellite network, both for its military and civilians — has thwarted Russia’s efforts to cut the Eastern European country off from the outside world, giving Kyiv a much-needed victory against Moscow in a conflict that shows no sign of ending.

“The strategic impact is, it totally destroyed [Vladimir] Putin’s information campaign,” said Brig. Gen. Steve Butow, director of the space portfolio at the Defense Innovation Unit, the Pentagon’s Silicon Valley tech outpost. “He never, to this day, has been able to silence Zelenskyy.”

“We’ve got more than 11,000 Starlink stations and they help us in our everyday fight on all the fronts,” Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine’s vice prime minister, told POLITICO. “We’re ready, even if there is no light, no fixed internet, through generators using Starlink, to renew any connection in Ukraine.”

France eyes delivery of tank-killing vehicles to Ukraine - The French Armed Forces Ministry said Thursday it will soon hold talks with its Ukrainian counterpart to arrange for the delivery of armored combat vehicles in what France’s presidency says will be the first time this type of Western-made wheeled tank-destroyer will be given to the Ukrainian military. Discussions will include the delivery timetable and the training of Ukrainian soldiers on the equipment, the ministry said.



Designated as “light tanks” in French, the AMX-10 RC carries a 105mm cannon and two machine guns. It’s primarily designed for reconnaissance missions and has enough armor to protect against light infantry weapons, according to the French ministry. They have wheels rather than tracks, allowing for better mobility than heavy tanks.

Ukraine has for months sought to be supplied with heavier tanks, including the American-made Abrams and the German-made

Leopard 2 tanks.

The Czech Republic and Poland have provided Soviet-era T-72 tanks to Ukrainian forces.

Geopolitics

U.S., EU Officials To Visit Serbia To Discuss Possible Solutions To Tensions Over Kosovo - Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has announced that a U.S. State Department official will visit Belgrade next week amid continued tensions over Kosovo and pressure on Serbia to introduce sanctions against Russia.

Vucic said on January 4 that Derek Chollet, a State Department counselor, is to visit Belgrade on January 11 or 12. Chollet last month had to cancel a visit to the Western Balkans and Brussels after he tested positive for COVID-19.

"I believe in creating better relations with the United States, we'll see how it goes. It won't be an easy conversation, but I believe we can talk," Vucic said at a press conference. Vucic said European Union negotiators would travel to Belgrade after Chollet's visit, and the officials would discuss possible solutions to the tensions over Kosovo, which were heightened last month when ethnic Serbs set up roadblocks in northern Kosovo over the arrest of an ethnic Serbian ex-police officer.