

Why Kupyansk Matters

di Lawrence Freedman

In a [post last summer](#) I described how Putin's 'narrative power' influenced discussions of the war 'in ways that encourage fatalism and defeatism in the West.' The source of the power was the assumption that Russia was bound to win because of its superior numbers, and its apparent willingness to tolerate huge losses in pursuit of its objectives. So long as Russian forces were moving forward, no matter at what pace and at what cost, then a decisive victory surely awaited them. The logic of this narrative was that Ukraine would be wise to accept the inevitable and get the best deal it could now, even if that meant handing over territory that Russia had failed to take by force of arms.

The persistent strength of the narrative can be seen in any number of newspaper articles which routinely refer to the advantages enjoyed by Russia and the gains that have been made. A particular influential one appeared in the [New York Times](#) on 6 December. It showed how Russia's claims about military success were linked to its tough stance in the negotiations:

"In recent weeks, Russian forces have advanced on several fronts. They are on the brink of capturing Pokrovsk, a onetime logistics hub in the eastern region of Donetsk, and have nearly encircled its neighbor, Myrnohrad. They are moving quicker in the southern region of Zaporizhzhia. They are pressing closer to the northeastern city of Kupyansk, and they are making gains around the eastern city of Siversk, according to battlefield maps, analysts and soldiers."

While acknowledging that at the current rate of progress the Russians were still far from achieving their apparent objectives, and the costs were extremely high, the message was gloomy. A Finnish analyst, Emil Kastehelmi, was quoted: 'The future looks really, really grim for Ukraine. I don't see a clear path out.'

This same logic underpins the Trump administration's current push for a deal. Thus [David Ignatius's report](#) that the Trump team's view that Ukraine might as well give up the 'roughly 25 percent of Donetsk it still holds' as it 'is likely to lose much of that in battle over the next six months, in any event.' The value of this narrative to Russia was made explicit by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov in an interview [with ABC News](#). Whether the war could be stopped, he explained, 'depends much on how people who support authorities in Kyiv recognize the inevitable outcome of our success.'

Both sides understand the power of this narrative: Russia has been anxious to push it as Ukraine has sought to debunk it. The Kremlin has had the easier task in this, not least because the Russian advantages are taken for granted. Many Ukrainians are clearly anxious about the remorseless Russian offensive, and it seems only small consolation that Russia has been forced to take so many casualties for what remain meagre gains, at least when set against the size of the country. The question of 'why continue to suffer to defend your land' gets put to Kyiv more forcefully than 'why are you accepting such huge losses to take slithers of land which isn't yours' is to Moscow.

Kupyansk

A counter to this narrative has occurred at Kupyansk in Kharkiv oblast.

This is one of the current Russian set of advances according to the New York Times story of 6 December. The city was occupied during the 2022 invasion and then liberated from the Russians that September. The Russians have long sought to take it back, partly for the symbolism but also because of its importance to Ukrainian logistics. Earlier this year Russian forces exploited a gap in Ukrainian defences that enabled them to cross the Oskil river north of Kupyansk and establish a bridgehead. They then began to make their way into the city. 'Sabotage-reconnaissance groups' of a few men would slip past thinly spread Ukrainian defenders, sometimes dressed in civilian clothes or Ukrainian uniforms. Even Ukrainian commentators feared that it might soon be lost. [An article in the Kyiv Independent](#) in late October spoke of how Kupyansk was 'likely to be the largest Ukrainian city to be occupied a second time by Russia after being liberated.'

The Russian military began to talk as if Kupyansk was as good as theirs. More importantly so did Putin. I discussed this two months ago when looking at the Russian leader's confident claims that this was one of two Ukrainian cities about to be captured. The other was Pokrovsk, about which I have since written, [here](#) and [here](#). In the second of these pieces I considered the difficulties surrounding decisions to withdraw from contested territory. The troops being used to hold on to a precarious situation might be better deployed elsewhere. But the more Putin boasted of an imminent victory in Pokrovsk the more Ukraine wanted to deny him the satisfaction. While Russia has largely been in control of the south of the city for some time the Ukrainians are still competing in the north, on the other side of the railway line. This week the Ukrainians have claimed to have regained control of over 16 square kilometres of territory.

This is a good example of what happens when an objective acquires a political value that exceeds its military value. Russian forces must now validate Putin's premature claims of success as a priority and with urgency. This leads them to throw more men into the battle. On 10 December there was even a surprising attempt to advance using armoured vehicles, including of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, cars and motorcycles. There is a reason why this sort of approach is avoided these days, and this was illustrated as drones slammed into the vehicles followed by artillery and mortars to devastating effect. Nonetheless, with a linked fight in nearby Myrnohrad, and because of the huge numbers of Russian troops committed, this is still a largely defensive and difficult battle for the Ukrainians.

Kupyansk is a different matter for here the Russians are at risk of defeat. In his October speech where he highlighted Russian progress, Putin observed that two-thirds of this city had been taken and that its 'centre was 'already in our hands' with fighting in the south. Yet the Ukrainians insisted that this was not true. I quoted in October an [interview](#) with Commander Yurii Fedorenko of Ukraine's 429th Separate Unmanned Systems Regiment, insisting that, contrary to Putin's assessment, 'the enemy does not control any district or quarter of Kupyansk.' But he made another point relevant to Putin's claim:

‘There’s also a political angle. You see videos where Russian forces unfurl a flag in a noteworthy place. They take one photograph with a Mavic drone and then those fighters are destroyed by our forces. But inside Russia, that image is circulated as if they’d taken the town’s central square, which is false: one isolated saboteur who is later neutralized doesn’t mean the enemy holds the city.’

I also noted in that article that Russian military bloggers had their own complaints about such antics: those charged with raising the flag in this way got killed and it gave a false impression of Russian strength.

Such concerns do not appear to have reached Colonel-General Sergei Kuzovlev who told Putin [on TV](#) on 20 November that men from Russia’s 68th Motor Rifle Division ‘brought to an end the liberation of the city of Kupyansk.’ Putin wanted to be sure: ‘That means, it’s over, it’s finished, it’s [Kupyansk] under our control completely?’ ‘Yes Sir. Exactly so. The city is fully under our control.’

2 December Putin was so confident in this success that he promised to facilitate visits by foreign media. A week later, on 9 December, Kuzovlev was awarded the [star of the Hero of Russia](#), presumably for the successful assault on Kupyansk.

And then on 12 December, the open-source intelligence group DeepState [reported](#) that Ukrainian forces had encircled Russian troops in Kupyansk and cleared its northwestern outskirts:

‘The operation remains difficult and prolonged, as Russian enclaves still exist in the central part of the city. There is already a significant amount of visual evidence online confirming the successful actions of Ukraine’s Defense Forces, which is why we are now publishing information that is safe to disclose.

As dramatic, and mocking Putin’s invitation to send the foreign media to the city, [Zelenskyy visited troops](#) in the area.

‘Many Russians boasted about Kupyansk — now we see the real result. I was here today, I met the guys, and I thanked every unit fighting here.’

He [published a video from Kupyansk](#). This was good political theatre and it had an evident purpose. To refute, in as conspicuous a manner as possible, Russian claims

about their offensive. As he explained to the troops their achievements mattered not only in denying territory to Russia but because they would influence the course of ongoing peace negotiations.

We have a [detailed account](#) of the battle from a participant, Yuriy Butusov, a journalist and also a platoon commander in the 'Khartia' search-and-strike group. He starts with a deteriorating situation in Kupyansk in mid-September after units of Russia's 68th Motor Rifle Division and 27th Motor Rifle Brigade crossed the Oskil River and pushed north of Kupyansk, capturing the villages of Kondrashivka, Radkivka, Tyshchenkivka and Holubivka and cutting of some Ukrainian units. Using [underground pipes](#) and forest cover they created a land route directly into the city and effectively took control of much of it, including Yubileinyi, dominating positions in northern Kupyansk, with a TV tower and high-rise blocks that control the approaches.

On 21 September, Ukraine's Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi formed the Khartia search-and-strike group based on the 2nd Army Corps of the National Guard of Ukraine. Operations began to liberate the villages, starting with Tyshchenkivka on 24 September. This was followed on 9 and 11 October by Kondrashivka and Radkivka respectively. According to Butusov this was the 'turning point in breaking the Russian defences.' When they took a forest near Kondrashivka back from Russian control they were able to relieve soldiers who had been stuck there for more than six months, which provides some idea of what some men have to endure when conditions are too hazardous to rotate them out of their positions.

Butusov describes how the Khartia group was tasked with

'pushing the Russians back, reaching the Oskil, cutting routes into Kupyansk, encircling occupying forces in the city and then liberating it in coordination with the 10th Army Corps and the "Kupyansk" tactical group.'

Getting to the Oskil and turning the exits from the pipeline (which was eventually destroyed) into a kill zone for Russians led to the Russians being encircled by early November. Using rain and fog cover, Russian commanders tried to get small teams, sometimes no more than a couple of men, to slip through Ukrainian lines. This had limited success. Ukrainian forces then began to eliminate Russian groups in the city

methodically. Once the Yubileinyi high-rise district was freed the Russians could no longer hold the southern part of the city.

Throughout his account Butusov emphasises the importance of command at all levels and how much tactical successes when the enemy has superior numbers and can fill the air with drones depends on effective planning and coordination. He acknowledges 'significant' Ukrainian casualties, adding that Russian losses are 'multiples higher', attributing 1,000 Russian casualties and 13 prisoners to the Khartia grouping.

[Another account](#) makes the same point about organization and tactics:

'The overall dynamics are positive: the units are operating in a coordinated manner, without chaotic rushes, with normal interaction and cover. This is exactly how an urban battle should look — slowly, methodically, with the elimination of fire points and without unnecessary adventures. Such organization really delivers.'

This left the enemy unable to manoeuvre and with 'options for retreat'.

Last Friday the Khartia group [reported](#) that Ukrainian forces had cleared the entire northwestern part of the city. And that the remaining Russian forces were fully encircled, according to the Ukrainian command. 'Fighting in the city center is still ongoing, but soon Ukrainian Kupyansk will be completely liberated!' [Syrskyi now assesses](#) that 90 percent of the city is liberated. Another [report](#) suggested that there were only 'approximately 120 Russian troops remaining in Kupyansk. (This is based on the number of active call signs – about 40 – and the assumption that means one radio for three to four soldiers). They were getting limited supplies via an 'air bridge.' The Ukrainian army spokesman added:

'In fact, there were ironic cases where they were being sent not food, but flags, so they could wave them and pretend everything was under control.'

Still Moscow is unable to acknowledge such setbacks. Raising the stakes, Russian Defence Minister Andrey Belousov yesterday spoke confidently on national TV:

'The Group of Forces West has occupied the strategically important city of Kupyansk, which the enemy is unsuccessfully trying to return to its control.'

There have been cases when Ukrainians have spoken too optimistically about bad situations being 'stable' but there are enough independent sources to confirm that

the Ukrainian gains in Kupyansk are far more than wishful thinking. This then raises the questions about whether Moscow is deliberately lying or they really believe that Kupyansk is almost theirs because that is what the field commanders tell them. I suspect the latter. This habit of confident claims have been going on for some time. On 20 November, when Putin and Gerasimov were claiming that Kupyansk was about to fall, their troops were already cut off. One can see why they do not want to retract past predictions. But this sort of doubling down means that their prestige, along with their narrative of inevitable success, is getting attached to unverified claims that may soon be exposed as false.

The actual position has been largely confirmed by Russian [military bloggers](#) who have written of a 'deteriorating' situation. Their explanation: insufficient Russian forces defending the positions they had taken. This has led to complaints about cities being 'liberated on credit.' Even before their task had been completed the victory was being claimed by Moscow. One blogger noted bitterly:

'But hey, Kuzovlev made a great report about full control over Kupyansk, about 15 encircled battalions and received Hero of Russia, Somebody wake up the commander, the Ukrainians are flooding the city!'

This premature boasting is blamed for lowering morale and panic actions such as rushed assaults to help bridge the gap between the reality and the boasts. [One blogger](#), 'Voenkor Kotenok', blames the local commanders: 'It seems that even the leadership of the Ministry of Defence has fallen for the bait of cheerful reports about the liberation of villages.' These are attributed to a desire for bonuses and medals, and to feed the centre's hunger for positive news.

The practice continues elsewhere. Thus Putin [announced](#) on 11 December that Siversk in Donetsk had been captured, and that this would pave the way for further successful advances. The Ukrainians and the [UK Ministry of Defence](#) deny that this is the case. Russian units had been using the poor weather to infiltrate groups into the city and engaged in the familiar trick of planting flags on prominent buildings. According to the Ukrainians the situation is 'tense' but fighting continues.

These current battles demonstrate that in current conditions, when fighting tends to involve relatively small formations, sometimes no more than a few men, it is very difficult for the Russians to complete their apparent successes. They have struggled to exploit breakthroughs. Depending on the weather, movement can be hazardous and anything that can be easily spotted in the open is likely to be struck. The preference is to encircle enemy forces, preventing supplies and reserves from entering and the wounded and weary from leaving, but if the numbers doing the encircling are insufficient gaps can open up. The defenders do not have to fight for every inch of a city to frustrate an enemy that wants to claim its capture. A natural break – the railway line in Pokrovsk or the Bakhmutka River in Siversk – can provide an opportunity to establish a new defensive line.

The effort required to hold on to small pieces of land can of course become wasteful and hazardous so that withdrawal becomes the only prudent option. At some point Ukrainian troops may have little choice but to withdraw from Siversk and Pokrovsk and move to better positions. Some positions in Pokrovsk have already been abandoned. The front is very long and the Russians are pressing at many points. There are also dangers for Zelenskyy and Syrskiy if they get caught in exaggerated claims about Ukraine's military position. But there is obvious value at the moment in showing that there is nothing inevitable about Russian military progress, and that counterattacks are possible. With the diplomacy at a delicate stage, the Ukrainians have an incentive to hold on for as long as possible.

The Negotiations

All this is connected to the current efforts by the Trump administration to negotiate an end to the war. This past weekend the discussions moved to Berlin. Ukrainian, European, and American negotiators declared themselves satisfied with progress. As for the Russians views we only have cautious comments. They have not budged from their core demands. The US proposal now involves three elements. An agreement on the conditions for a ceasefire, plus [security guarantees to Ukraine](#), and an economic recovery plan. We can be reasonably sure that if the Europeans and Ukrainians are

content the Russians are not. They now have to work out whether they just reject or can find ways to keep the discussions with the Americans going.

The Americans seem to assume that the conflict is largely about territory, so that if the Russians are given enough they will be satisfied and end the war. Unfortunately the Russian objective remains the subjugation of Ukraine so it is best to assume that even if a cessation of hostilities could be agreed it will not last. The Russians will object to any security guarantees to Ukraine of any credibility, even if these do not involve full membership of NATO. They have indicated in the past that permitting membership of the EU, as if it was in their gift, might be a concession, but they can probably rely on the EU's own processes to hold up full membership.

The Americans are working with maps to try to find lines and allocations that would work. One proposal would be to establish demilitarized zone along the entire line of contact (any ceasefire would need this). It is worth keeping in mind that this is a very long line (over 1000 km) and given drone ranges might need to be 20 km either side of this line. That could need a lot of peacekeepers if any are to be deployed. This is before ideas of demilitarising and neutralising the contested territory in Donetsk are considered.

This is the territory over which the armies are battling and the negotiators are arguing. The advantage of a ceasefire is that no big issues of principle have to be decided. It will reflect the current reality - that Russia currently occupies a chunk of Ukrainian territory. That is quite different from Kyiv accepting some special Russian entitlement to the rest of Donetsk.

The most recent survey of Ukrainian opinion, undertaken by [InfoSapiens](#) at the end of November, confirmed that 77 percent would be prepared to make concessions for the sake of peace. But not any concessions. When looking at those that have been mooted none were popular but those connected to NATO – no NATO membership or no NATO troops on Ukrainian soil – were deemed either 'acceptable' or 'rather acceptable' to about 40 percent. The transfer of territories to Russia that it claims but has not managed to occupy was acceptable to only 7 percent and rather acceptable

to 11 percent. The numbers are even lower for Zaporizhzhia and Kherson - only to 2 percent and 1 percent respectively.

The territory that the Kremlin wants Ukraine to hand over in Donetsk covers some 6,500 square in which more than 200,000 Ukrainians live. In terms of security it includes the 'fortress belt' of Kostyantynivka, Druzhkivka, Kramatorsk and Slovyansk, that are well defended and would be extremely challenging for the Russian armed forces to take. As the [Financial Times](#) notes:

The terrain there also makes for a strong barrier for Ukraine, with its natural cliffs and valleys, as well as the man-made quarries and slag heaps that dot the landscape. However, west of the defensive line, the steppe flattens out, and Russia could have open fields and less densely populated areas to sweep through, analysts say. It would be easier for Russia to move deeper into Ukraine should its forces take the fortress belt cities — or be given them.

So even if Russia tried to fight for this belt it would struggle doing so, while if it had the territory and then broke a later ceasefire it would then be able to take much more land with comparative ease.

[ISW notes](#) that Belousov is not only claiming Kupyansk but also Pokrovsk and Siversk and is well on its way to the fortress belt. Yet he also claimed that during the course of this year that Russian forces have seized 6,000 square kilometres in total (an area smaller than Delaware), accounting for just under one percent of Ukraine's total land area. The ISW assessment is that the amount is 4,699.04 square kilometres (slightly larger than Rhode Island). It adds:

'Even Belousov's exaggerated claims about Russian advances demonstrate the slow pace of those advances. Belousov claimed that the Russian seizure of the Fortress Belt will enable Russian forces to "quickly" seize the remainder of Donetsk Oblast, but his statements about Russian advances in 2025 are actually in line with ISW's assessment that it will take Russian forces two or more years to seize the remainder of Donetsk Oblast at great cost.'

The Americans talk of progress but there is no indication that they have found a territorial compromise that the two sides could accept. In his ABC interview Rybakov

if anything hardened the Russian stance. Referring to the four Ukrainian oblasts plus Crimea that Russia has annexed he said, 'We have five altogether and we are not able, in any form, to compromise on this.' Zelenskyy has ruled out any territorial concessions. The demands are incompatible. The issue is whether either side needs to back down and that depends on assessments of how the fighting will unfold over the coming months. The Russians are adamant that Ukraine's defence of its territory is a lost cause. The Ukrainians are determined to show that it is not. This is the narrative battle at the heart of the actual battle. And that is why Kupyansk matters.