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Key processes in November 2022

1. The dynamics of the Russia–Ukraine war remains high, but the frontline mobility is diminishing. A variant of the “Verdun Meat Grinder” emerges in the Bakhmut direction. Russia keeps demolishing Ukraine’s infrastructure.
2. Western countries continue to provide significant military and financial support to Kyiv.
3. Despite the obvious increase in threats of incidents and risks of escalation, large-scale militarisation of the region continues, while prospects for peace agreements remain elusive.
4. Belarus seeks to stay out of the war, but is forced to build up its defence capacity with the modest means and resources available to it.

Frontline developments

November’s combat activity serves as an illustration of the tendency towards a curtailment of frontline mobility and commencement of a stationary phase of the war that we outlined previously. The well-organised (especially in contrast to the urgent exodus from the Kharkiv Oblast) withdrawal of Russian forces from Kherson is another proof. A sort of “Verdun Meat Grinder”, i.e. a prolonged and extremely bloody battle on a small section of the front, is about to appear in some areas (e.g. Bakhmut). It is highly likely that increased numbers of such “meat grinders” will emerge.

Meanwhile, Russia continues to rely on the destruction of Ukraine’s critical infrastructure to reduce the ability of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) to move troops to the front, as well as to cause pressure on the Ukrainian leadership by its own society and Western countries. The consistent systematic destruction of the energy system has already resulted in widespread lengthy blackouts across the country. Despite the supply of Western air defence systems, Ukraine has failed to prevent the critical destruction caused by missile attacks.

One predictable result of the Russian operation has been large waves of emigration of Ukrainians. Revealingly, Germany has almost run out of standard accommodation for refugees and the authorities are already forced to lodge them in tents, which may become a long-term practice. In November, the Polish government was reported to voice its dissatisfaction over the EUR 144.6 million compensation proposed by the European Commission for hosting Ukrainian refugees: the Polish authorities intend to spend EUR 8.4 billion on their support — the highest amount of any host country.

All in all, we see neither the defeat of Ukraine on the battlefield, nor Kyiv’s victory over Moscow. On the contrary, all the evidence still points to a dragged-out war.

Western aid to Ukraine

In November, Western countries continued to channel significant amounts of aid into Ukraine. For example, on 15 November, the European Union resolved to launch a training mission for the Ukrainian military. This is the first initiative of this kind at the EU level; previously, the EU countries had offered training individually. The mission is projected to take two years, and its budget for this period amounts to EUR 106.7 million. The first stage envisages the training of 15,000 Ukrainian servicemen.

In late November, British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said that London intended to hand over three Westland WS-61 Sea King helicopters to Ukraine. These machines are perfectly suited to fight Russian submarines in the Black Sea. Notably, this is the first delivery of Western-style aircraft to Kyiv.

The U.S. remains the main source of military assistance to Ukraine. Neither the midterm election results, nor the U.S. public opinion suggests a quick change in Washington's course. On 10 November, the Pentagon announced a new USD 400 million package. Later, on 16 November, the Biden administration asked the Congress for approximately USD 37.7 billion in aid to Ukraine. The funding for the duration of the fiscal year would go to defence equipment, humanitarian assistance, and nuclear security support.

Growing threats of incidents and risks of escalation

On 15 November, an incident was reported that, while resulting in no significant escalation of international tensions, clearly showed how the war in Ukraine could potentially transform into a larger regional conflict. A Ukrainian anti-aircraft guided missile of the S-300 air defence system fell in south-eastern Poland, killing two Polish farmers. At first, the global media and a number of officials blamed Russia for the missile strike without any investigation. However, after inspecting the fragments of the missile, Poland and NATO countries adjusted their position, pointing to the Ukrainian origin of the ammunition.

Despite this, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy continued to insist for some time that Ukraine had not been guilty of the incident, which was enough for the Russian side to claim that Kyiv was trying to provoke direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO. The public position of the Ukrainian leadership also caused a negative reaction in some military and political circles in the West. They fear, not unreasonably, that such incidents might become more frequent in the future, and without proper coordination of public statements by Kyiv and NATO countries, each would carry even greater risks of uncontrollable escalation.

Concerns about the growing risks of conflict expansion seem to be evidenced by the increasingly frequent meetings of the Belarusian leadership focusing on defence issues. On 1 December, the third such meeting in the past two and a half months was held. The first two were held on 4 and 10 October, respectively, an unprecedented pace for the Belarusian authorities. Discussions were centred on ways to prevent the confrontation between Russia and NATO, specifically the Russia–Ukraine war, from migrating into Belarus, primarily through forceful actions by the radical opposition, which might be supported by some foreign force. There is a possibility that the protocol signed by the defence ministers of Belarus and Russia on 3 December to amend the agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on joint provision of regional security in the military sphere of 19 December 1997 stems from these concerns of the Belarusian government.

Furthermore, in November, Belarus continued its routine verification of the records of all persons liable for military service, which required the attendance of such persons to ensure face-to-face communication with the military. This mass initiative, the first of its kind in the country's history, is to be completed by the end of the year.

Regional militarisation

On 10 November, European foreign policy chief Josep Borrell announced plans to expand the EU's Military Mobility action plan. According to him, the EU's entire road and rail infrastructure should be adapted to ensure rapid transportation of military equipment and

troops. Borrell also said that the EU would involve Ukraine, Moldova and the Balkan countries in projects to augment military mobility. The UK also intends to join the EU military mobility programme.

Large-scale military preparations are still underway in Poland. On 7 November, the defence minister shared plans to expand the U.S. airbase in Powidz, where Apache attack helicopters are deployed. On 9 November, Poland's prime minister spoke about a significant increase in military spending to 3–4% of GDP, which would promote Poland's military budget to one of the largest of its kind across NATO. More than USD 21.4 billion "or maybe even USD 27.8 billion" is planned to be spent on modernisation alone. Poland's military spending currently stands at more than 2% of GDP.

Germany continues its journey back to its long-standing historical role as the dominant military power in Eastern Europe. This is evidenced, among others, by plans to place German army units armed with Patriot SAM systems in Poland, as well as the recent deployment of a forward-based group of an additional German army brigade to Lithuania, which can be repositioned to Lithuania within 10 days if need be.

During her visit to Lithuania, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock declared the need to create a "long-term infrastructure" for the stationing of NATO troops in that country. The Lithuanian authorities insist on the permanent deployment of a full-fledged German brigade in addition to the NATO troops already stationed in the country (including more than 1,000 German soldiers). According to the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, Vilnius and Berlin agreed that Lithuania would host a full German brigade in 2026, as soon as proper infrastructure is in place.

De-escalation efforts

Countries in the region have been taking steps to de-escalate tensions, albeit only sporadic and very limited in scope. In this issue, we will focus on just one story, which as a rule is interpreted completely differently by the media.

In November, the export of weapons and military equipment from Belarus to Russia continued. Open sources report the movement of more than 200 T-72A tanks, dozens of infantry fighting vehicles and military trucks, as well as missiles for S-300 anti-aircraft systems. The predominant interpretation is that the equipment is being removed from storage depots for the needs of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine. However, another reason is officially mentioned as well — the equipment is sent for modernisation. One more aspect needs to be emphasised, though: the removal of weapons and military equipment from Belarus runs counter to all regional militarisation trends. These actions seem logical in the context of Minsk's unwillingness to directly participate in the war.

Prospects for peace agreements

In the course of combat operations, the Kremlin managed to accomplish the most important immediate task it probably had: to secure access to Crimea via a land corridor. Therefore, the primary objective now is to make arrangements with the West in order to consolidate these acquisitions. This notwithstanding the Russian leadership has publicly reaffirmed its determination to achieve all of its previously stated goals in Ukraine. At the same time, the actions and statements of the other key players — primarily the United States and Ukraine — so far point to the intention to continue the war until all of the Ukrainian lands previously occupied by Russian troops have been liberated. All this gives rise to doubts that meaningful negotiations to end the conflict will start any time soon.

Meanwhile, the role of Turkey and its president Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the potential negotiating process remains exceptional. On 14 November, it was Ankara that played host to a meeting between the chiefs of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia and the Central Intelligence Agency — the first one since the war broke out. The U.S. side insisted that the talks focused on reducing the risks of nuclear escalation and prisoner exchange rather than resolving the conflict around Ukraine.

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