

Ukrainian frontline is “crumbling” and momentum swings in Russia’s favour

**Written in the style of the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Events Insights*

What’s happened?

On October 29th, Russian troops captured the Ukrainian town of Selydove, continuing their territorial expansion through the Donetsk region. Subsequently, Ukrainian Colonel General Dmytro Marchenko gave an interview in which he reported that the Ukrainian frontline is “crumbling”, challenging the viability of President Zelensky’s “victory plan”.

Why does it matter?

Marchenko’s comments demonstrate an increasing internal dissatisfaction with Ukrainian governance. The general listed several issues of the “victory plan”, which he attributed to a flawed leadership strategy. First, he highlighted that the “plan lacks any points addressing Ukraine”, and that it risks compromising the needs of Ukrainian people. Second, Marchenko explained that the Ukrainian military is facing a chronic resource shortage, citing a lack of personnel and ammunition. Third, the general criticised Zelensky’s overdependence on Western aid, stating that the West does not “owe” Ukraine support. Marchenko’s trenchant criticism of Zelensky’s leadership is symptomatic of a broader misalignment between the military and government, as well as disintegrating cohesion within Ukraine in the war effort.

The general’s remarks indicate that Russia holds a dominant position following months of its relentless war of attrition. It is rare for senior leaders to publicly express concern about their country’s weakened position, therefore Marchenko’s comments reflect severely worsened prospects for Ukraine. The occupation of Selydove is strategically significant, as it is a vital logistical hub that facilitates a rapid movement of humanitarian aid, military supplies and troops across Ukraine. Furthermore, as underlined by Marchenko, Russian territorial gains in Selydove provide Russia with a “tactical exit to Pokrovsk” (Selydove lies north of Pokrovsk). Should Russia succeed in capturing Pokrovsk, its capacity to spread further into the Donetsk area would be enhanced, as the town is well-connected to other major cities including Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.

The foreign policies of key international players are amplifying the power discrepancy between Russia and Ukraine. North Korea has shown a readiness to back Russia directly by deploying 10,000 soldiers to fight in Kursk. Meanwhile, Ukraine’s Western allies are signalling a reluctance to strengthen their involvement. With Donald Trump as president, crucial US support to Ukraine is likely to be progressively cut back (if not eliminated). This scenario would have grave ramifications for Ukraine’s capacity to withstand attacks, as the US remains its top provider of military funding. Furthermore, under Trump’s leadership, Zelensky may face pressure to make concessions to Russia, including ceding control of Crimea and Donbas.

What next?

Marchenko’s comments highlight a growing discontent with Ukrainian leadership and a rising strength disparity between Russia and Ukraine. With the momentum shift firmly in Russia’s favour and an evolving foreign policy landscape that supports this dynamic, continued territorial advances and a resolution on Russia’s terms are increasingly probable.