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# 'Mines Everywhere': Ukraine's Offensive Is Proving a Hard Slog

Dense Russian defenses, lack of air cover add to challenges facing Ukrainian troops

By *Marcus Walker* [Follow](#) | *Photographs by Serhii Korovayny for The Wall Street Journal*

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BLAHODATNE, Ukraine—A few miles south of this village, at the tip of the deepest advance of Ukraine's counteroffensive, a platoon from the Ukrainian 68th Jaeger Brigade fought at close range with Russian marines.

The Ukrainians took casualties from mortar and small-arms fire, but they inflicted more, and the Russians retreated.

"It was tough, but we won," said the platoon commander, known by his call sign Yeti.

Having taken the position near the village of Urozhaine, the men found it covered in mines, he said. "There are mines everywhere, even inside houses," he said.

Ukraine's ambitious offensive to take back Russian-occupied land is proving to be a hard slog against dense minefields, well-prepared defenses and Russia's superior air power.

After the first probing attacks yielded mixed results, Ukrainian forces have mostly paused their assaults in recent days as commanders draw lessons from the past two weeks and try to figure out how to punch through Russian lines without taking huge losses.



Yeti, a platoon commander in the Ukrainian 68th Jaeger Brigade, says the speed of the advance has slowed.



The view of a power plant from a burned-out car in eastern Ukraine.

In the southern Zaporizhzhia and eastern Donetsk regions, Ukrainian troops are still working their way through Russia's first lines of defense, and haven't yet reached the main line of Russian fortifications.

Meanwhile, Russia continues to launch its own assaults in other parts of eastern Ukraine, with little apparent success, as well as continuing missile and drone attacks on Ukrainian cities.

In this bucolic part of Donetsk, Ukrainian troops are reconnoitering Russian positions in search of weak spots.

Some of the Ukrainians' tactical successes so far have come at Blahodatne, Ukrainian for Blessed, and other villages along the Mokri Yaly River. A breakthrough here could allow Ukrainian forces to advance on the port cities of Mariupol and Berdyansk, threatening Russia's grip on the country's south.

So far, however, the push remains localized and limited. Most of Ukraine's brigades earmarked for the offensive and equipped with potent Western tanks have yet to join the fight.

In Blahodatne, elements of 68th brigade are preparing their next moves after taking the village in a fierce three-day firefight with Russian marines.

"Our speed of advance has slowed down, but we are widening our area of advance along the front line," said Yeti. "The enemy is fighting hard, but our motivation is great, and we are moving forward," he said.

The advance here, starting from the town of Velyka Novosilka, is one of three axes on which Ukrainian forces are currently focusing. They have also made local gains around the

destroyed city of Bakhmut, but have taken heavy losses in assaults south of the city of Zaporizhzhia.

## River Offensive

Ukraine recaptured a series of villages down the Mokri Yaly River in the Donetsk region.



Note: Areas of control, fortifications as of June 12

Sources: Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project (Russian-controlled areas); Brady Africk, American Enterprise Institute (Russian fortifications)

Carl Churchill/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A young soldier wounded in the latter sector said he took part in an attack on a Russian position near the village of Luhove, south of Zaporizhzhia. Two companies of the Ukrainian 36th Brigade attacked during the night, said the 19-year-old volunteer soldier, known by his call sign Kit. "We were successful," he said. "In the morning, Russian artillery started working on us. Almost everybody's injured, two are dead."

Kit said he and a comrade were carrying a wounded man on a stretcher when a Russian rocket landed nearby, killing the wounded man and badly injuring the other rescuer's leg.



Shrapnel hit Kit's helmet and his forearm, which was bandaged as he sat on a park bench in a rear area. "I don't know how I got out of there. It was some kind of a miracle," he said.

Asked how he felt, Kit grinned and said: "Combative!"

Around Velyka Novosilka on Thursday, poplars swayed in a summer breeze and birds sang in between the crump of outgoing artillery and the crash of incoming shells. A lonely Ukrainian Su-25 warplane sprayed chaff as it turned and twisted, flying low over the unsown fields.

Men in Yeti's platoon showed off the explosive booby traps they had cleared from their temporary base in Blahodatne, a house abandoned by its owners like nearly all in the farming communities in this area. Only the cat remained. For dinner, it ate rigatoni with tomato sauce, like the soldiers.

Another officer called Yeti on the radio, asking for sappers to clear yet more mines, so they could fix a communication cable severed in a Russian artillery strike. "I hear you. Others also need sappers. I'll deal with it and let you know," Yeti responded.



A soldier of the 36th Brigade rests in Pokrovske, eastern Ukraine.



A field base used by the 68th Brigade in the fight for Blahodatne earlier this month.

The Russians are launching around 10 airstrikes a day against the villages they have retreated from, the men of the 68th said.

“Aviation is a big problem for us and a clear advantage for them,” said Yeti. “We need F-16s, F-18s, all the Fs.”

The 68th has radar to warn of aircraft and Stinger missiles to keep them at bay. Russian planes rarely venture close, normally firing imprecise missiles from a few miles away, said the brigade’s commander, known by his call sign Shum. A muscular, U.S.-trained colonel, Shum said the difficulties of the advance were to be expected.

“An offensive is never easy. Especially considering that all the Russians have been doing is preparing to repel our attacks,” Shum said. “It’s slowing us down, but it’s not stopping us.”



Shum, the commander of the 68th Brigade, says the difficulties of the advance were to be expected.

—*Ievgeniia Sivorka contributed to this article.*

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