

3 Key Developments in the Russia-Ukraine War in 2024

By [Moscow Times Reporter](#)

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A Russian Army serviceman on the front line in the Kherson region of Ukraine. **Alexei Kononov / TASS**

Reflecting on 2024 in his annual end-of-year press conference, President Vladimir Putin described the year as a "landmark" in achieving the "goals" of Russia's war against Ukraine.

And at a Defense Ministry session this month, Putin [said](#) Russian forces had captured 189 settlements at the front and that the Armed Forces had grown to 1.5 million personnel, boasting that over 1,000 volunteers were signing military contracts every day.

These figures appear to have done little to give Moscow a significant advantage over Kyiv in the third year of a war that it expected to win in a matter of days.

While Moscow continues to occupy large swathes of Ukraine, it has not achieved significant gains this year. Kyiv, which has held parts of Russia's Kursk region since August, has also not advanced, leading analysts to debate whether the war had reached a stalemate.

Yet Russian forces are now [closing in](#) on the city of Pokrovsk — which, if captured, could open a path to controlling all of the Donetsk region.

Here is an overview of the year's key developments on the battlefield:

Ukraine's Kursk offensive

When Kyiv launched its incursion into Russia's border region of Kursk in August, it became the most significant foreign attack on Russian territory since World War II.

The offensive has seen Kyiv capture over two dozen settlements in Kursk, including the town of Sudzha, a key natural gas transit hub between Russia and Europe.

Thousands have been evacuated from Kursk and remain displaced. Many others remain trapped in Kyiv-held territory.

Analysts say that while the incursion is viewed as a significant military success for Ukraine — both on the ground and politically — the area remains a major challenge for Kyiv and Moscow.

Moscow has deployed thousands of North Korean soldiers to the region to help claw back its lands, the U.S. Department of Defense said, with Kyiv reporting that it has encountered troops from the reclusive country in combat.

As of November, Kyiv still controlled 800 square kilometers of Kursk, down from previous estimates that it controlled almost 1,400 square kilometers, a Ukrainian army source told AFP.

Many believe that the region could be used as a bargaining chip in potential ceasefire talks between Moscow and Kyiv, and that the fighting in Kursk could intensify as Russia seeks a political win by regaining control of its territories.

During his annual press conference this month, Putin promised to drive Ukrainian forces out of the Kursk region but did not specify a timeline.

“In the coming months, we are likely to see Moscow try to push Ukraine back [from the Kursk region] as quickly as possible,” said Ivan Stupak, a military expert and ex-officer of Ukraine's SBU Security Service.

Yet experts say that significant changes may follow the January inauguration of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who has promised to “end the war” upon taking office — potentially paving the way for negotiations between Moscow, Kyiv and Washington.

At his press conference, Putin [said](#) he was ready to speak to Trump “anytime.”

Cross-border rocket strikes

Russia and Ukraine have been ratcheting up their deadly aerial offensives, unleashing increasingly advanced weaponry and spurring fears that the conflict could further escalate.

U.S. President Joe Biden in November cleared Kyiv to use U.S.-made ATACMS long-range

missiles against military targets inside Russia, a move that Moscow had long warned would provoke a devastating response.

On Nov. 21, Russia launched the Oreshnik, an experimental, nuclear-capable ballistic missile, against Ukraine for the first time in what Putin called a response to Kyiv's use of ATACMS against targets on Russian soil. The launch came days after Putin signed a decree lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons.

Experts believe the new missile flies at 10 times the speed of sound and may be able to strike targets up to 5,500 kilometers away. Yet according to Stupak, the use of Oreshnik was more as "a PR show" than a genuine escalation of the war.

At the same time, while Kyiv's use of ATACMS has complicated Russia's logistics in frontline areas, their deployment has also had a modest impact on the overall course of hostilities.

"From a military standpoint, it was clear that the use of a small number of missiles on key specific targets was not going to drastically change the situation on the frontlines," Israeli military expert David Sharp told The Moscow Times.

"While the use [of ATACMS] came with certain losses [for Moscow], it was more as a political message for Russia," he said.

Russia's slow advance

Ukraine's eastern regions remained the epicenter of heavy fighting, with Moscow advancing and pressing overstretched and outgunned Ukrainian forces for months.

In October, the Russian army advanced 478 square kilometers into Ukrainian territory, a record since March 2022 in the first weeks of the war, according to an AFP analysis of data from the U.S. think tank Institute for the Study of War (ISW).

That's more territory than Moscow gained in August and September 2024 (477 and 459 square kilometers respectively). The last time Russia made such advances was in March 2022, when they marched towards the capital Kyiv in the early stages of the war.

As of mid-December, Russian forces [were](#) only several kilometers from Pokrovsk in the Donetsk region, which they have been approaching from the south and east for months.

Moscow's army was also gaining territory at the north of the front, having seized more than 40 square kilometers near the Kharkiv region city of Kupiansk last month. Captured by Russian troops in the early stages of the war, Kupiansk was then retaken by Ukraine in a September 2022 counteroffensive.

According to Stupak, the Russian army's tactic is to encircle settlements from all sides instead of launching costly and time-consuming frontal assaults.

"The tactic works, but the cost is another matter. Russia has suffered significant losses and appeared to show little concern for its troops. But Ukraine is also taking losses," Stupak said.

Throughout 2023, Russian forces seized just 584 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory,

according to AFP analysis based on data released by the ISW.

Yet since Jan. 1, 2024, they have already taken more than 2,660 square kilometers, an area slightly bigger than the size of Moscow.

From the start of the war in February 2022 until Oct. 27, 2024, Russia had taken 67,192 square kilometers of Kyiv's land.

Along with the annexed Crimean peninsula and the areas of eastern Ukraine controlled by Moscow-backed separatists before the Kremlin's February 2022 invasion, Russia currently controls 18.2% of Ukraine's 2013 territory.

AFP contributed reporting.

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