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EUROPE

Inside the Ukrainian counteroffensive that shocked Putin and reshaped the war

By Isabelle Khurshudyan, Paul Sonne, Serhiy Morgunov and Kamila Hrabchuk
December 29, 2022 at 1:00 a.m. EST

A Ukrainian soldier at an entry checkpoint to the town of Izyum in the Kharkiv region on Sept. 15. (Wojciech Grzedzinski for The Washington Post)

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KHARKIV, Ukraine — After weeks of fighting for scraps of territory on the war's bloodiest front, Oleh, a 21-year-old Ukrainian company commander, was summoned suddenly last August, along with thousands of other soldiers, to an obscure rendezvous point in the Kharkiv region.

Are you on Telegram? Subscribe to our channel for the latest updates on Russia's war in Ukraine.

At his last position, relentless Russian artillery fire had stalked his men's every step. But here, in a patch of villages, farmland and streams in Ukraine's northeast, the quiet was deeply alarming. "The silence bothered me the most," Oleh said. "It seemed off. How could this be?"

Even more unsettling were the orders his superiors handed down: to charge as far as 40 miles into enemy territory at high speed in an audacious, top-secret counteroffensive — directly between the Russian-occupied stronghold of Izyum and Russia's own Belgorod region dotted with military bases. It seemed preposterous. "Some kind of dubious operation," Oleh said.

Oleh, a 21-year-old Ukrainian company commander who took part in September's Kharkiv counteroffensive. (Serhiy Morgunov for The Washington Post)

But after a summer of heavy Russian casualties and President Vladimir Putin's refusal to conscript reinforcements, the Kremlin's troops were badly depleted. A shift of units south — to defend the captured regional capital of Kherson amid talk of a big Ukrainian push there — had left the Kharkiv area exposed.

It was a stunning vulnerability, confirmed by Ukrainian reconnaissance teams and small drones. And Kyiv would exploit it to change the dynamic of the war, and achieve Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's goal of redrawing the battlefield map before winter.

[*Russia and Ukraine are fighting the first full-scale drone war*]

After Russia's invasion began on Feb. 24, Ukrainian troops forced Russia's retreat from Kyiv in an underdog triumph that ended the first stage of the conflict. Thwarted from conquering the capital, Russia concentrated its power in the south and east, pummeling Ukrainian forces until new, longer-range weapons arrived from the United States and Europe and helped stall Moscow's advances. Ukraine had survived but, after a half-year of war, one-quarter of its territory was still occupied and its military had failed to show it could launch an offensive to retake substantial ground.

That was about to change.

In early September, Ukrainian forces would steamroll across hundreds of square miles, routing the Russians and surprising themselves. The Kharkiv offensive revealed the inability of an undermanned and underequipped Russian force to hold territory across a vast front. It shocked the Kremlin, and it proved to Ukraine's supporters that they were not wasting billions in weapons and economic aid.

A Russian military vehicle and ammunition left behind in the Kharkiv region after Ukraine's armed forces carried out a surprise counteroffensive. (Heidi Levine for The Washington Post)

Putin was forced to conscript hundreds of thousands of men, making the costs of war clear to a Russian population that had isolated itself from its leader's "special military operation." The mobilization set off unrest but was too late to stop Ukraine's momentum from spreading south to Kherson, where, after hard combat and significant losses, Kyiv's forces in November recaptured the only regional capital that Putin had seized since the start of the war.

This reconstruction of the Kharkiv and Kherson counteroffensives is based on interviews with more than 35 people, including Ukrainian commanders, officials in Kyiv and combat troops, as well as senior U.S. and European military and political officials.

Control areas as of Dec. 27
Sources: Institute for the Study of War, AEI's Critical Threats Project — LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

What emerges is a story of how deepening cooperation with NATO powers, especially the United States, enabled Ukrainian forces — backed with weapons, intelligence and advice — to seize the initiative on the battlefield, expose Putin's annexation claims as a fantasy, and build faith at home and abroad that Russia could be defeated.

"Our relationship with all of our partners changed immediately," said Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, who commanded the Kharkiv offensive. "That is, they saw that we could achieve victory — and the help they were providing was being used with effect."

II

In the last days of August, Syrsky met in a large operations room in Ukraine's east with his top aides and key brigade commanders. Before them was a 520-square-foot 3D-printed terrain map of the part of the Kharkiv region occupied by Russia.

Each commander walked the path of his unit's planned assault amid the replica cities, hills and rivers, acting out its mission and discussing coordination, contingencies and worst-case scenarios. Officers used laser pointers to spotlight trouble spots.

"It was painstaking work," Syrsky said.

[*War in Ukraine has decimated a once feared Russian brigade*]

Since at least the spring, Syrsky had been considering the Kharkiv region, and the strategic cities of Balakliya and Izyum, as vulnerable points for the Russians.

He started thinking about how he would conduct an offensive by driving deep into Russian-held territory from an unexpected area north of the two cities, cutting off Russian forces from reserves across the nearby border and putting both Balakliya and Izyum at risk of encirclement.

The geography and the positioning of Russian forces convinced him it could be accomplished in a single, rapid blow — ideally so fast that Russia would not be able to regroup.

When orders went out from the Ukrainian General Staff last summer for commanders to come up with possible diversionary operations to draw Russian forces away from the defense of Kherson, Syrsky knew what he would propose.

"The enemy … thought that, because so many forces had been built up in Izyum and more were stationed over the Russian border in the Belgorod region, 'you'd have to be crazy to move and try to strike right in the middle and split the two,'" Syrsky said. "But the thought was there."

Ukrainian Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, who commanded the Kharkiv counteroffensive, said speed was critical. "Everything depended on the first day — how far we could break through," he said. (Anastasia Vlasova for The Washington Post)

In the early stages of the war, Russia had converted Izyum into a military stronghold, eyeing the city as the base for a pincer movement that would surround Ukrainian forces in the east. At the height of its preparations, according to Syrsky, Russia had amassed 24 battalion tactical groups — about 18,000 troops — in Izyum and surrounding towns, along with stockpiles of weapons and ammunition.

By August, in part thanks to detailed intelligence supplied by the United States, Syrsky saw that the number of battalions in Izyum had dropped by at least half, as Russia relocated its most experienced fighters to Kherson.

"In the history of wars, there have been many cases when an attack on a diversionary axis — that is, on a secondary axis — turns into the main axis," Syrsky said. "The prospects were all there, because … the enemy absolutely didn't expect that we would attack in the exact place where we delivered the main blow."

Syrsky calculated that Ukraine could not afford the losses that would come with attacking towns and cities head-on. Instead, he planned to sweep across the front, encircling population centers and forcing the enemy to retreat.

Speed was essential. If the Russians sent in reserves from across the border, large numbers of Ukrainian troops could get cut off behind enemy lines.

"Everything depended on the first day — how far we could break through," Syrsky said. "The farther we went, the less they could do, the more their units would be cut off and isolated under psychological pressure."

By August, the Ukrainians had all but run out of the Soviet-era ammunition used by most of their artillery. Western allies were rushing in NATO-standard ammunition and systems — but not enough.

[*Inside the monumental, stop-start effort to arm Ukraine*]

In a risky decision, Ukraine moved some of the most valuable Western weapons systems away from hotter spots on the eastern front. Each attacking brigade was armed with at least eight M777 howitzers, commanders said. In some cases, the M777s arrived at encampments the night before the assault began. Extra drones were also brought in to ensure that brigades could pinpoint targets and use less ammunition.

Ukrainian troops fire a M777 howitzer at front-line Russian forces in the Kharkiv region in July. In early September, Ukraine would begin its surprise counteroffensive. (Gleb Garanich/Reuters)

Maj. Gen. Andriy Malinovsky, head of missile forces and artillery training for the Ukrainian army, was still worried the force could need more than 100,000 munitions. The Ukrainians had only tens of thousands — not enough for a protracted slog. (Ultimately, Malinovsky said, they used about 32,500 over five days).

U.S. intelligence helped ration the ammunition through accurate targeting. After many months, according to U.S. and Ukrainian officials, the two partners had worked out a real-time regimen: The Ukrainians would outline the types of high-value targets they were looking for in an area, and the United States would use its vast geospatial intelligence apparatus to respond with precise locations.

The Americans, however, were not deeply involved in planning the Kharkiv offensive and learned about it relatively late, according to U.S. and Ukrainian officials.

Despite attempts at secrecy, the Russians eventually realized that the Ukrainians were up to something.

Thanks to Russian bureaucracy, Syrsky said, the information "didn't reach anyone or it wasn't taken into account."

At the Pentagon, officials suspected that Russia's leadership didn't fully realize the vulnerabilities on the Kharkiv front because battlefield commanders were lying. Another hypothesis, a senior U.S. defense official said, was that Russia saw the onslaught coming but didn't have enough men to stop it.

The Ukrainians moved pontoon bridges around, hoping to trick the Russians into expecting a direct assault on Izyum, rather than a drive deep into territory some 30 miles northwest.

By mid-August, Syrsky was confident the plan would work — but he needed to sell it to Zelensky. He described the mission as a chance to liberate a large swath of territory with minimal resources and losses.

Zelensky, craving a big battlefield win, approved the attack.

III

On Sept. 6, just past 3:30 a.m., Oleh's company of about 100 soldiers, part of the 25th Airborne Assault Brigade, began to advance in small columns of three infantry fighting vehicles each. For hours before they started to move, Ukrainian artillerymen had been pounding Russian positions with U.S.-made M270 multiple launch rocket systems.

Oleh, seen in the Donetsk region in December, said of the counteroffensive: "We broke through the front line, and the enemy started panicking." (Serhiy Morgunov for The Washington Post)

Command posts. Ammunition depots. Fuel storage facilities. The firing was relentless. Across the front, Ukrainian military officials later said, Russian soldiers or their separatist proxies struggled to receive orders or coordinate with nearby forces as the rockets rained down. Some troops began to retreat.

"We broke through the front line, and the enemy started panicking," Oleh said, speaking on the condition he be referred to by his first name because his relatives live in Russian-occupied territory. "They were panicking because we attacked all front-line positions at once — the entire front line itself was enormous — and everywhere there was a breakthrough."

By the end of that first day, Oleh's company had advanced about 11 miles with little resistance, reaching the edge of Volokhiv Yar, a picturesque town in a ravine. Capturing this key junction would allow Ukrainian forces to block two major highways heading into Izyum and Balakliya.

That morning, Evhenii Andrushenko woke up to four Russian tanks parked in front of his home in Volokhiv Yar. Soldiers were sitting in a gazebo alongside his fence, he said. "They were sitting there drinking beer," Andrushenko said. "And talking about where to run."

Sources: Institute for the Study of War, AEI's Critical Threats Project — LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

Oleh and his troops moved into the town. They had accomplished their first objective. And just as quickly they moved on, racing southeast for several days, with relatively little resistance, into spaces abandoned by Russian forces.

Under the original battle plan, the company, by Day 7, was to take up a position on a ridge north of Izyum, some 40 miles from the offensive's starting point. But the day before, Oleh was summoned with other company commanders to a meeting. "Half the units in Izyum, maybe even the majority, are simply fleeing," their battalion commander said. "So, we're entering Izyum."

Destroyed Russian military equipment in the center of Izyum on Sept. 14. (Wojciech Grzedzinski for The

Ukraine's company sent first and big at the first Russian checkpoint in the city. Within minutes, a heavy Dnipro sedan with flags and the painted letter "Z" — symbol of the invasion — came speeding up the road filled with fighters.

If they were trying to flee, they were headed in the wrong direction.

"Come this way, my sweet," Oleh said.

A soldier blasted the car with a rocket-propelled grenade.

"Bastar eliminated," he said.

In the distance, the Ukrainian troops could see other Russian vehicles heading in the correct direction — out of the city.

"We expected that we would fulfill all the missions of the operation," Syrsky said. "But that there would be this kind of cascading collapse — I didn't expect that."

A Ukrainian tank rolls in the town's main drinking fountain, Bucha's Kozarovytsi. The Washington Post

When Oleh's company entered central Irpin, having made it there without any losses, the troops were disembarked at what lay before them: Tanks in working order, ready to be driven, abandoned artillery pieces, ready to be fired. Fuel tankers "filled to the eyeballs." Tons of ammunition and light weapons.

The Russian troops had had everything they needed for a serious defense, Oleh thought, except the will to fight and, apparently, enough men. Even the other Russian units hold in the area holed, walking Moscow had on backup entirely to scale.

"When we entered Irpin, some kind of feeling arose, like the taste of victory," said the company's 36-year-old chief surgeon, Anton Chernyi. "It seemed to everyone like the beginning of the end."

Anton Chernyi, 36, director of medical surgeons in Irpin's company, Dnipro Bearing Bear. The Washington Post

Irpin was cleared by Mariuol satellite internet and placed a call. Some 75 miles east of the front line, Irpin's people were being under occupation in the city of Horishchi in the Luhansk region.

"What on earth are you guys up to over there?" his father asked. Russian forces in Horishchi had just fled, his father said, and separatist fighters were manning the checkpoints.

Oleh told him they had taken Izyum and chased the Russians out of hundreds of square miles surrounding it in a matter of days.

"Well done! Well done!" his father said.

"Don't worry, Oleh said. "Soon we'll be in Horishchi."

He wasn't fully kidding. Oleh, it seemed, could soon be going home.

II

The road in the Kharkiv region rocked Moscow.

Putin's refusal for months to take the political risk of announcing a draft had had disastrous consequences.

Left with little choice, he declared what he called a "partial mobilization" to conscript up to 300,000 troops, his biggest and riskiest escalation since the start of the war. Hundreds of thousands of Russian men fled the country in a frenzy.

In a speech, Putin characterized the mobilization as a necessary step to lend all Ukrainian nations have an destroying Russia. He also suggested he might use nuclear weapons.

[Russia's annexation puts world's two or three steps away from nuclear war]

"This is not a bluff," Putin said.

Men leave a row of Putin's Russian conscripts in Kharkiv's Saltivka District. Putin's decision to conscript Ukrainians. The Washington Post

Putin urged his annexation plan, including Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions to be part of Russia despite lacking full control over them.

"I want the Kyiv authorities and their real masters in the West to know one, so that they remember this," Putin said in a speech. "People living in Luhansk and Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia are becoming our citizens. Forever."

On Oct. 8, Putin also designated Gen. Sergei Surovikin the first sole commander in Ind Russia's war over the country.

With a direct line to Surovikin, Putin began to receive a more unvarnished picture of the problems on the battlefield, according to two people familiar with the matter, who said that previously Putin had been given overly rosy assessments by his top military officials.

The peril of his disconnect from reality could not be mistaken. Zelensky had arrived to stand in the center of Lyman.

V

After his company's victory, Oleh's soldiers spent about a week in Izyum in mid-September, relishing the thought that the war's end was near. Then they headed southeast, crossing into the Donetsk region on orders to make the city of Lyman.

Reality tenfoured along the way.

In a line of trees near the village of Kosovi Ivar, the company came under fire from three Russian tanks. Five men from Oleh's company were killed, according to the chief surgeon. Twelve were wounded, including a squadron commander who had his soldiers for four hours after shrapnel ravaged his jaw. The Ukrainians ultimately took the village, Oleh said, but the racing advance had stalled to something tangled and slower.

[Russia is fighting for land already in vain]

Gains in the direction of Lyman would be hard-fought.

Volodymyr Zelensky arrives in the Lyman liberated by his troops, a sign that Putin's annexation plan is not yet done. The Washington Post

Oleh was 13 years old in 2014 when war came to his native Luhansk region. Russian-backed militias had seized the city of Stanytsia Luhanska for the predominantly Russian-speaking territory to the east. But ceasefire is an area that historically had Russian sympathetic, a young Oleh was always one of his stamen.

"I'm not a hero, and I don't have a shoplifted," he said. "I was born and raised in an independent country. I have my own opinion, which is Ukraine has a right to live and exist. I don't know how it is in Russia."

After ninth grade, Oleh left for a local military school, then enrolled at the Odessa Military Academy in the department of airborne assault forces. There and a half years into his four-year degree, war broke out. The students were sent straight to the front. Oleh ended up back in Ukraine's east, first as a platoon commander and later as a company commander, leading soldiers who in many cases were years older than he was.

After Kosovi Ivar, the company moved farther south, taking up a position outside Lyman. The Russians in the city were nearly surrounded, but unlike their compatriots in Izyum, they fought.

"There was so much enemy artillery fire — everything they had, all the artillery they had, the tanks, everything, was unleashed right onto us, he said. Oleh's company, in the Donetsk region, was hit with Russian artillery, rocket fire and tank fire, he said. Finally, one night, the Ukrainian company heard the rumble of a large column of vehicles and covered the road with artillery fire.

Lyman, too, had fallen.

A soldier, identified by his nickname Ilya, a sniper with the Azov Brigade, leaves a car in Lyman, Donetsk region, after being wounded in a Russian artillery attack. The Washington Post

In the days since, Oleh's company has advanced 17 miles east, just past the border of the Luhansk region, where Russia is deploying drafted conscripts by the truckload onto the front line ple zelos from his homeroom.

[Joe can't front with Ukrainian troops. Comment shelling, no heat or coffee]

"It's still quite a long ways to my city," Oleh said. "But every day we get closer and closer, I can't wait."

VI

Kharkiv gave the Ukrainians a chance to punch an open door. Kherson presented a solid wall.

Over months of occupation, the Russians had dug trenches and built large defenses. The mainland of the steppe offered little natural cover for an attacking force, and a maze of irrigation canals as obstacles. Moscow had brought in its best troops.

"The mineefields they set up there — they practically didn't leave themselves lane more than one step. Everyone who came there would change there and add additional minefields," said Maj. Gen. Andriy Kovalchuk, who was tasked with leading Ukrainian counterattacks. "We didn't have the option to advance rapidly."

To decide how to go about the operation, Ukrainian commanders arrived in Germany last July for a war-gaming session with their American and British counterparts.

At the time, the Ukrainians were considering a far broader counteroffensive across the entire southern front, including a drive to the coast in the Zaporizhzhia region that would sever Moscow's coveted "land bridge" connecting mainland Russia with Crimea, which was illegally annexed in 2014.

In a room full of maps and spreadsheets, the Ukrainians ran their own "tabletop exercise," describing the order of battle — what formations they would use, where the units would go and in what sequence — and the likely Russian response.

Maj. Gen. Andriy Kovalchuk, the chief commander of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kherson region, conducted Ukrainian-American war-gaming. The Washington Post

The American and British war gamers ran their own simulations using the same inputs but different software and analysts. They couldn't get the operation to work.

Given the numbers of Ukrainian troops and available stockpiles of ammunition, the planners concluded that the Ukrainian armed forces could conduct power before achieving their objectives.

"This was them asking for our advice," said a senior U.S. defense official, who cited this to this article spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military planning. "And our advice was, Hey, guys, you're going to lose all more than you gain. They isn't going to work out well."

Beyond the risk of running out of steam, a *Zaporizhzhia offensive* might have pushed Ukrainian forces into a pocket the Russian could surround with reinforcements sent along two cars, from Crimea and Russia.

"Our commanders thought for Ukrainians left pretty determined that they were going to do the whole thing anyway — just that there was a lot of pressure to do the whole thing," the defense official said.

The White House relayed the U.S. military's analysis to aides with Zelensky's office.

National security advisor Jake Sullivan called to the Ukrainian president's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, about the plans for a broad counteroffensive, according to people familiar with the discussions.

A Ukrian detachment in the Russian-occupying Donetsk region, Kovalchuk's Kherson. Mission accomplished for the Ukrainian forces. The Washington Post

The Ukrainians accepted the advice and undertook a narrower campaign focused on Kherson city, which sits on the west side of the Dnipro River, separated from Russian-held territory to the east.

"I give the Ukrainians a lot of credit," the defense official said. They allowed reality to move them toward a more limited set of objectives in Kherson. And they were nimble enough to exploit an opportunity in the north. That's a lot."

Kovalchuk set out to harass the Russian-occupied area on the west side of the Dnipro and trap the Russian forces. "We took was not only to liberate the territory," he said. "We took from the start was to cutoff and destroy the force. That is, to let not them leave or exist."

The objectives of the Kherson offensive were to breach the Russian occupied area west of the Dnipro River and trap the Kherson forces. Ukrainian forces made gains in the vicinity of Kherson city and Ivanivka, Inhulo and Ivanivka. The Washington Post

Tokmak
Ukraine
Russia
Kherson
Ivanivka
Inhulo
Dnipro
Kherson
Kakhovka
Dam
Kakhovka
reservoir
Dnipro
Kherson
Ukraine
Russia
Tokmak
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Russia

shuttle the wounded, often under fire from the Russians. Later, they used a Russian-made car.

"During the next evacuation, my combat medic was hit by shrapnel through the window directly into the car," Yuri said. "Throughout these two weeks, there was not a single window left in the car. Everything was smashed by shrapnel. But still the evacuations took place."

By October, Ukraine had begun stabilizing the situation, and Yuri was dispatched to enter the nearby village of Dnyeiv Bird. There, he climbed a red metal structure, bursting with happiness, to record on camera that the village had been liberated.

A strong wind gusted. "We solemnly hang a blue-yellow flag above Dnyeiv Bird," he yelled into the gale. "Glory to Ukraine!"

VIII

Back in Kyiv, impatience was growing.

Kovalchuk was insisting it was just a matter of time before the Russians retreated — the leaves were about to fall off the trees, the river would freeze in winter, the Russian forces were running low on supplies.

But for Kyiv, Kovalchuk wasn't moving fast enough. He was replaced by Brig. Gen. Oleksandr Tarnavsky, a deputy of Syrsky's during the Kharkiv operation.

Brig. Gen. Oleksandr Tarnavsky, a deputy of Syrsky's in the Kharkiv counteroffensive. He replaced Kovalchuk as commander of the Kherson operation. Joint Press Center of the Tavria Defense Task Force.

A senior Ukrainian government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly, said Kovalchuk "wasn't getting the job done."

But the change wasn't publicly announced, the official said, so as not to provide Russia with any kind of propaganda victory. The Americans were informed.

"I think there were folks who were probably getting impatient with the movement in the south," said a senior U.S. military official. "It was a really good start and then it just kind of stopped."

Tarnavsky, the new commander, said he applied some of the principles he and Syrsky had used in Kharkiv, attacking where the Russians least expected it.

He said he singled out the territory between Mykolaiv and Kherson — flat farmland with few trees and obstructive concrete irrigation canals — as the place to mount the main offensive drive. "The calculation," Tarnavsky said, "was the enemy wouldn't think we would do it there."

IX

Responsibility for that difficult stretch of front, northwest of Kherson, fell to Col. Vadym Sukharevsky, commander of the 79th Motorized Infantry Brigade.

His men had charged through Russia's front lines, overcoming losses, and were pushing against ferocious resistance to get close enough to strike the river crossings into Kherson with artillery. That fire would also make Russian resupply trips by pontoon barges nearly impossible. His forces were almost there. "It was literally a battle for every meter," Sukharevsky said.

Up against elite Russian air-assault units, Sukharevsky's less experienced troops were forced to engage in what he called battlefield "folk art."

A Ukrainian volunteer soldier trains with a Bison drone. (Sasha Maslov for The Washington Post)

They modified the batteries in off-the-shelf DJI Mavic drones so the copters could fly four times farther, up to 12 miles. They obtained an additive used to give natural gas its scent and launched the foul odor into enemy trenches. They accepted drones from cigarette smugglers and transformed them into self-detonating explosives.

"Our army is used to fighting with improvised means," Sukharevsky said.

One of his platoon commanders, Chief Sgt. Yevhen Ignatenko, the owner of a large Kherson grain-shipping business and a regional politician, explained how best to destroy his own barges, which Russia had requisitioned to ferry forces and supplies across the Dnieper.

Ignatenko drew on a lifetime of local knowledge — back roads, canals, pumping stations — to figure out how to advance through the difficult terrain. He also gathered information about the Russians' activities from a network of sources behind enemy lines.

A tourist car marked with the painting "mine!" sits along the road to Zolotyi Ha village in November. (Mykola's Grandmom for The Washington Post)

On the night of Nov. 9, Sukharevsky said, the brigade closed in on Zelenyi Hai, a village that put Kherson within artillery range. The Ukrainians began striking the river, he said. But the Russians had begun retreating days earlier.

Sukharevsky said he credits Ukraine's victory partly to the artillery systems, guided munitions and long-range rocket launchers sent by the West, which eventually were down a Russian force already low on ammunition and struggling with supply lines.

The pressure from Ukrainian troops forced the retreat, but they didn't manage to run down or destroy the fleeing Russians. Mines, in some cases laid a meter apart and three rows deep or tucked into this strips on the roads, prevented the Ukrainians from giving chase.

"They didn't hold back," Sukharevsky said. "They mined with everything, even new means we had never heard of."

X

When Zelensky visited Izyum in mid-September, days after Ukraine's Kharkiv offensive, the officials with him were tense, even though he was still some 50 miles from the front line. A visit to Kherson, with Russian snipers just across the river, posed a much greater risk.

Zelensky, however, could not be kept away.

Tarnavsky stood beside Zelensky on Kherson's central square. "I was amazed at the people I saw," Tarnavsky said. "All of their faces, there was just joy on them."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visits the liberated city of Kherson on Nov. 14. (Mykola's Grandmom for The Washington Post)

Zelensky raised the flag over a liberated city for the second time in two months and described the moment as the "beginning of the end of the war."

Ignatenko, the regional politician and Kherson shipping magnate serving in the 5th Brigade, sent a drone up over the river and found one of his barges half-submerged near the Antonovsky Bridge, but others were missing.

"We'll find them," Ignatenko said. "And if we don't find them, we'll build new ones. It's okay. At least we will be a free country."

Shane Harris in Washington and Mary Ilyushina in Riga, Latvia, contributed to this report.

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