

In an interview where his face was blurred and voice changed, he said he had transferred funds to a Ukrainian charity and that he had a “negative” opinion of the Russian authorities.

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3h ago 12.52 CEST

Zelenskiy says Ukraine troops in 'fierce' border battles with Russians

Ukrainian troops are locked in intense battles with the advancing Russian army in two border areas, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has said.

Associated Press reports:

Zelenskiy said “fierce battles” are taking place near the border in eastern and northeastern Ukraine as outgunned and outnumbered Ukrainian soldiers try to hold back a significant Russian ground offensive.

Zelenskiy said in his nightly video address Sunday:

■ *Defensive battles are ongoing, fierce battles, on a large part of our border area.*

Ukraine’s general staff said late Sunday that Russian forces had conducted at least 22 attacks over the previous 24 hours in two parts of the Kharkiv region and had “tactical success.” The statement did not elaborate.

The Kremlin’s forces are aiming to exploit Ukrainian weaknesses before a big batch of new military aid for Kyiv from the US and European partners arrives on the battlefield in the coming weeks and months, analysts say. That makes this period a window of opportunity for Moscow and one of the most dangerous for Kyiv in the two-year war, they say.

The Kharkiv incursion may be an attempt to create a “buffer zone” to protect Belgorod, an adjacent Russian border region battered by frequent Ukrainian attacks – to the Kremlin’s embarrassment.

Yevgeny Poddubny, a usually well-connected military correspondent for Russia’s state TV corporation VGTRK, said in a recent Telegram post that the Kharkiv assault marked the beginning of “a new phase.”

He said:

■ *We’re pushing the enemy back from the border, destroying the enemy in order to deprive the Kyiv regime of the opportunity to use relatively cheap rockets to attack Belgorod.*

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Updated at 12.59 CEST

3h ago 12.21 CEST

Ireland is considering making cuts to state support for asylum seekers and refugees, including those who arrived from Ukraine, in a bid to bring the system more in line with other European countries, Prime Minister Simon Harris has said.

Just over 100,000 Ukrainians have fled to Ireland since Russia’s invasion in February 2022.

Harris told Newstalk radio ahead of Tuesday’s cabinet meeting:

On his first visit to Serbia since the start of the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022, Kuleba met Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic and new Serbian prime minister Milos Vucevic, whose government includes several pro-Russian ministers, including two who have been under US sanctions.

A statement issued by the prime minister's office after the talks said that "Serbia is committed to respecting international law and the territorial integrity of every member state of the United Nations, including Ukraine."

Although Serbia has condemned the Russian aggression on Ukraine, it has refused to join international sanctions against Moscow and has instead maintained warm and friendly relations with its traditional Slavic ally.

Serbia has proclaimed neutrality regarding the war in Ukraine, and its authorities repeat that Serbia does not supply weapons to any parties. However, there are reports that Serbia has delivered weapons to Ukraine through intermediary countries.

The visit by Kuleba and Zelenska, who toured the Serbian capital with Serbian first lady Tamara Vucic on Sunday, was met with criticism in Moscow. Comments by readers in the Russian state-run media such as "shameful" were published by RIA Novosti.

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Updated at 13.56 CEST

3h ago 13.06 CEST

A Russian court on the annexed peninsula of Crimea has handed down prison sentences of up to 16 years to five Ukrainian citizens accused of sharing military intelligence with Kyiv, state media has reported.

AFP reports:

The men were charged with treason and espionage after sharing information on the location and movements of Russian army units that helped the Ukrainian army target aerial strikes, the FSB security service alleged.

The information "was used by paramilitary formations in Ukraine to adjust their artillery and rocket strikes on Russian army positions," the FSB said in a statement cited by state news agencies.

They were handed prison sentences of between 11 and 16 years, the FSB said.

Russian authorities, including in parts of Ukraine under their control, have arrested dozens of people for allegedly collaborating with Kyiv since the start of the two-year conflict.

The FSB said separately on Monday it had arrested a man who used to work for Russian technology giant Yandex over sending money to a Ukrainian charity that bought equipment and weapons for its armed forces.

The agency said it "suppressed the illegal activities of a former Yandex employee in the Nizhny Novgorod region, who was involved in committing treason in the form of providing financial assistance to the Ukrainian armed forces," Russian state media reported.

The state-run TASS news agency published an FSB video showing masked agents running to detain a man, pushing him to the floor and handcuffing him.

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41m ago 15.02 CEST

AFP has some analysis on the significance of Putin's new political appointments.

President Vladimir Putin's nomination of top economic official Andrei Belousov as defence minister is a sign of the importance the Russian leader places on the war economy in gaining the upper hand in what he expects will be a long conflict against Ukraine, analysts say.

It is unclear if outgoing defence minister Sergei Shoigu's move to head the national security council is a demotion, while the future of its previous chief Nikolai Patrushev, a shadowy but powerful figure and an ardent hawk, is also murky.

Andrei Belousov has since 2020 occupied the post of deputy prime minister in charge of the economy. Like his immediate predecessors as defence minister he has no background in the military but also no past in the Russian security services.

His priority at a time when Russia is planning to ramp up the defence budget to account for some 30% of total government spending will be to fine tune procurement and boost the domestic defence industry to win success on the battlefield.

Putin "needs to shift even further to a war economy and efficient military spending - and Andrei Belousov is one of his most trusted economic officials," Ben Noble, associate professor of Russian politics at University College London, told AFP.

"Putin's goal is to enhance arms production effectiveness and optimally meet military needs," wrote Tatyana Stanovaya, founder of the R.Politik consultancy. "In this context, Belousov is a logical choice."

14.43 CEST

Russian oil giant Lukoil's LKOH.MM Volgograd refinery was partly shut down after being hit by a drone attack on Sunday, two sources familiar with the matter said, the second such attack this year on the largest refinery in southern Russia.

Reuters reports:

The attack caused a fire at the 300,000 barrel-per-day refinery but it was put out quickly and there were no casualties, the head of the Volgograd region Andrei Bocharov said.

Ukraine has been firing drones at Russian oil facilities during its war with Russia and a drone attack on the Volgograd facility in February was by Ukraine, a source in Kyiv told Reuters at the time.

The CDU-1 unit, the plant's biggest unit, was damaged by Sunday's attack, causing an emergency shutdown and was still offline on Monday, sources familiar with the matter said.

Lukoil declined to comment on the fire.

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1h ago 14.38 CEST

New Russian government appointments show that Moscow will try to scale up its war effort and is seeking to reconfigure its economy for its defence needs, Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said on Monday.

More than two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin tapped civilian economist Andrei Belousov as his surprise new defence minister on Sunday.

Podolyak said on the Telegram messaging app:

“Russia is finally isolating itself and will try to scale up the war, expand its formats while reconfiguring the economy...”

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2h ago 14.11 CEST

Strikes kill four in occupied Ukraine, Russian border region

Four people have been killed by strikes in a Russian-held part of eastern Ukraine and a Russian border region, local officials said on Monday.

The Russian-installed leader of the eastern Lugansk region of Ukraine, which is occupied by Moscow, said rockets had hit an industrial zone in the territory, AFP reports.

“We already know of three killed and four wounded” in the attack on Krasnodon, which is known as Sorokyne in Ukrainian, the official, Leonid Pasechnik, said on social media.

Separately, regional authorities in the Kursk border region of Russia said one woman had been killed and three others wounded in a Ukrainian drone attack on several cars.

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2h ago 13.56 CEST

Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba made a surprise visit to Russia-friendly Serbia on Monday, together with Ukraine's first lady, Olena Zelenska, in a sign of warming relations between the two states.