

Update on Ukraine

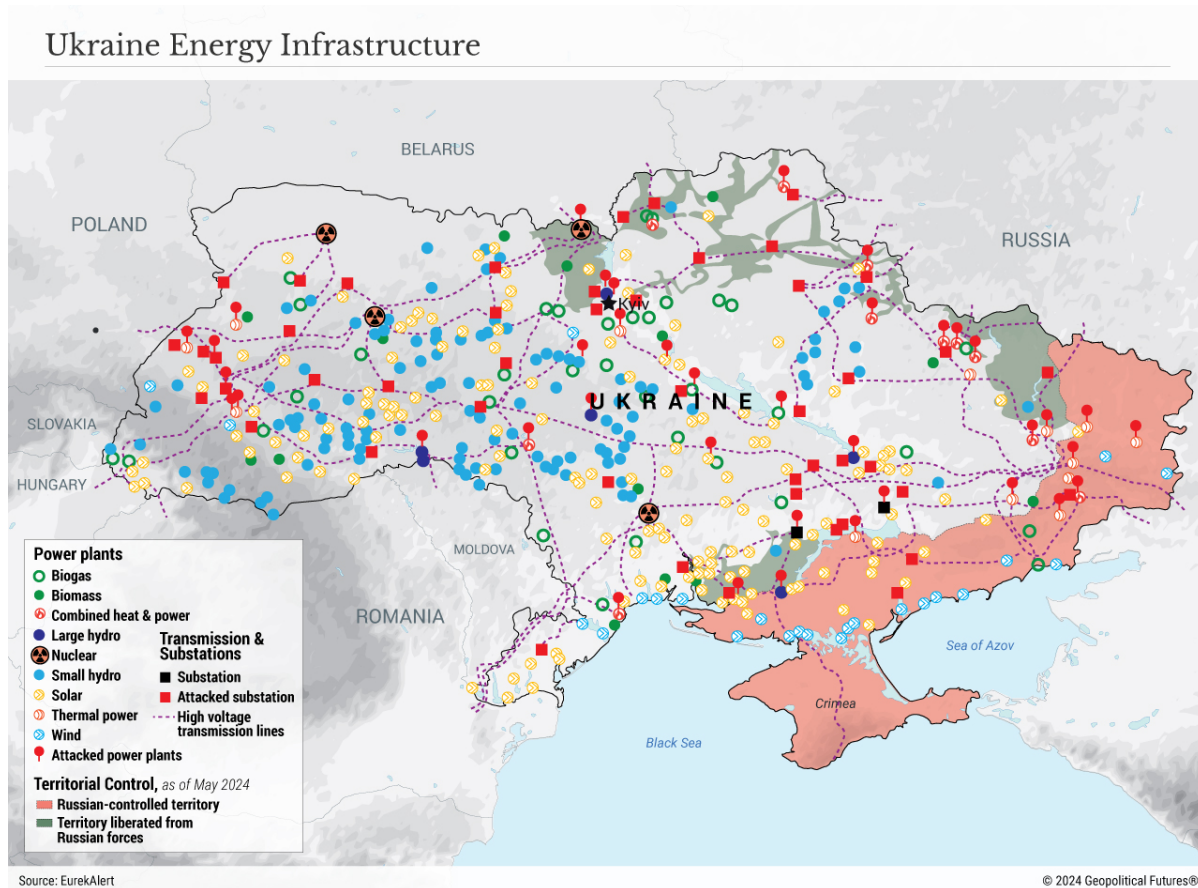
by Geopolitical Futures - October 2, 2024

At a U.N. meeting in New York on Sept. 22, the G7 countries announced that they would provide a \$50 billion loan to Ukraine. The announcement followed reports of new developments in the conflict related to energy infrastructure, the country's economic conditions and another possible wave of refugees fleeing west into Europe. As the war enters its third winter, now seems a good time to update our readers on how the current ground conditions could affect the outcome of the conflict.

As in all wars, logistics is crucial. Key routes can be effectively targeted using terrain denial weapon systems such as artillery, airstrikes, drones and mines. But in the winter, these routes become fewer. As the initial invasion showed, unimproved roads become impassable in snow and mud, restricting major movements to better routes. Improved or paved roads with predictable traffic will be more vulnerable to attack. This will greatly affect forward locations that are farther from the main supply routes converging at essential transport hubs. Paved roads, meanwhile, will be vulnerable to attack.

Road conditions will also make resupplying frontline troops increasingly difficult. This will have a direct effect on Ukrainian positions in Russia's Kursk region, which cannot be supplied through air assets because of Russian air defense systems. Pontoon bridges will be less efficient and reliable as rivers freeze, leading to chokepoints on the limited routes available for crossing. Consequently, there will be a significant need for route security and control if Ukrainian forces choose to maintain positions farther from the main supply routes.

Equipment – or rather, the lack of equipment – is also affecting realities on the ground for the Ukrainian population. Insufficient resources needed for the winter may hurt morale – not just for the troops but also for the public writ large, which is contending with infrastructure problems that have made water and food more scarce. On Sept. 19, for example, the U.N. **reported** that Russian forces struck several energy facilities, noting that it could “take years to fully repair and restore” them. Indeed, attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure persist, with 20 of 24 regions indicating similar strikes. **Reports** paint a dire picture: Some 95 percent of thermal power plants have been destroyed, and all major hydroelectric power plants have failed. So far, it's unclear whether the generators provided to Ukraine as part of its aid packages will keep the civilian population warm and meet the military's energy needs. (The recently announced G7 loan is expected to address repairs and reconstruction, but both will take time.)



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Access to clean water and food has reportedly become a challenge too. The war famously wrecked Ukraine's agricultural production, and **estimates suggest** Russia has damaged roughly one-third of Ukraine's water supplies. Even if the country can produce enough food to meet the people's needs, energy shortages will **drive prices up**. The U.N. refugee agency **reports** that over 6.7 million Ukrainians have already left the country since the Russian invasion. Approximately 6.2 million are still in other parts of Europe, while an additional 3.6 million are internally displaced within Ukraine.

This raises the obvious question of whether the Ukrainian public still supports the war. The latest polls show that 53 percent of Ukrainians believe the war is worth it, but only 36 percent are willing to endure the war for "as long as it lasts." Nearly 30 percent are not willing to endure it any longer. If the general public's living conditions and the country's military standing degrade further in the next few months, the percentage of those who don't support the war could climb higher. That could affect political stability and, therefore, the way the war is waged.

This is especially relevant considering Ukraine's already high reliance on drones, which are meant to compensate for its shortage in manpower and conventional weaponry. Ukraine is dependent on the conventional weapons the West delivers and uses drones and satellites for surveillance, seeking to make it difficult for Russian forces to consolidate and mass troops and equipment near the frontline for major advances without being targeted. Ukraine's drone manufacturing factories are based in Kyiv, making them vulnerable to any political instability that would be caused by a decrease in popular support for the war.

Given all factors constraining Kyiv's ability to fight a protected war, the government may consider finding **a way to end it** – if it can do so on favorable terms. Ending the war would benefit the West. But victory is hard to achieve, and there's no evidence to suggest Russian forces are unable to use larger weapons in their arsenal, even in Kursk. Despite the costs, the most likely outcome is a winter stalemate with limited advances as both sides try to hold on to territory and equipment that can be resupplied in the spring.

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