

'Cyborg' Fighter Rallies Ukraine Counter-Attack Against Russia
David Brennan - Newsweek

A Ukrainian lawmaker fighting on the southern front around the city of Kherson has urged a “serious” expansion of the creeping Ukrainian counter-offensive in the region—touted as a possible turning point in Russia's invasion of the country.

Roman Kostenko—one of the famous “cyborg” Ukrainian troops who defended Donetsk International Airport in 2014, and a veteran of the years-long fight against Russian-directed forces in the Donbas—told Newsweek how he thinks Kyiv and its partners abroad can boost the slow Ukrainian advance in the south.

*In an in-depth interview via phone from near the front line, Kostenko said:
Ukraine's “creeping” military operation needs “serious” revision
Russians are using everything “barring nukes” during battles
Occupying forces “have entrenched and are holding on”
Defenders needs U.S. ATACMS to “really rattle” the Russians*

The Ukrainian approach in the south has so far been defined by small, localized advances north of Kherson city, backed by deep strikes on Russian logistics and command targets using long-range weapons including U.S.-made HIMARS.

Kherson-native Kostenko said it is insufficient.

*“If this is going to be our only strategy going forward, it will take us a very long time to liberate the **occupied territories**,” he said in a phone call with Newsweek from close to the front line.*

“In my opinion, we need to plan serious counter-offensive operations, supported by additional troops and weapons, to make real progress.”

The “creeping offensive,” he added, “allows us to retake the odd village or town. For that you only need a few battalion leaders. But when it rises to the level of district commander, the chief of the general staff, or even our commander-in-chief, then this type of offensive is laughable.”

“We need to widen the scope of these operations, both defensive and counter-offensive, and if we, the ones calling the shots, cannot organize them, we need to bring in those who can.”



Roman Kostenko's office This undated photograph shows Ukrainian MP and commander Roman Kostenko at an undisclosed location in southern Ukraine.

Kostenko—a member of the Golos liberal faction in parliament—served as a commander in Ukraine's Airborne Brigade and later as a colonel in the Alpha special operations counter-terrorism unit of the Security Services of Ukraine (SBU). He saw action in the east of the country against Russian forces and their local separatist proxies.

Wounded twice in action, Kostenko has focused on security issues since becoming a member of the Rada parliament in 2019. He now sits on the body's National Security, Defense and Intelligence committee.

Kostenko said his dual role as a fighting parliamentarian offers a unique perspective on the issues facing front-line troops.

“You have to have people on the ground because the official line from the commanders might be that, ‘We have everything we need,’ but when we come down there it turns out some weapons or equipment are still in storage facilities and not in soldiers' hands,” he said.

‘Overwhelming enemy force’

When Russian forces invaded in February, Kostenko and former comrades formed a territorial defense unit and fought in the battle for the southern city Mykolaiv currently under Ukrainian control and north of the front line, which now runs between Mykolaiv and Kherson.

Kostenko's unit was then absorbed into the Armed Forces of Ukraine and has continued operations on the southern front.

The fighting, he said, is relentless. “In 2014 there was intense fighting, airstrikes, but all of it was not even close to the scale and intensity of their assaults since February,” Kostenko said.

“One of the main differences is the overwhelming enemy force, their sheer numbers. The scope of their operations was much narrower back then.”

“They keep saying, ‘We haven't even begun yet,’ that is a lie. They are using a full range of personal weapons, tanks, artillery, strategic bombers, fighter jets, throwing all they've got at us, barring nukes.”

Newsweek has contacted the Russian Foreign Ministry to request comment.



Gaëlle Girbes/Getty Images A column of smoke rises in the sky after a Russian bombing in a village on the front line on July 7, 2022 in Mykolaiv, Ukraine.

Ukrainian forces have slowly been regaining ground on the southern front, and are reportedly poised for a major counter-offensive towards the city of Kherson.

Russian forces around Kherson have been static for months. Troops and equipment were pulled away to press Moscow's grinding offensive in the eastern Donbas region, and sustained Ukrainian attacks have corroded supply lines and slowed reinforcements.

Still, some 20,000 Russians are reported to have been sent to the area in recent days to guard against the expected Ukrainian counter-offensive.

“You can fight them, you can hit them where it hurts and make them retreat—Ukraine has shown that to everyone,” Kostenko said, though urged caution.

“The biggest mistake military chiefs can make is underestimating their opponent.”

“Claims that Russia is retreating or giving up its positions are premature,” he added.

“They have entrenched and are holding on to the key strategic points, otherwise we would have knocked them out of here already.”

The HIMARS effect

Kostenko said the balance is shifting in Kyiv's favor. "Their supply lines are indeed taking a hit and forcing them to rethink their plans for the territories on the right bank of the Dnipro river," he said.

"We've managed to get some parity in terms of artillery strikes by using the [HIMARS](#) to hit their ammo depots and facilities on the left bank of the Dnipro." "The shelling from their side has subsided and become more selective, as opposed to the heavy indiscriminate shelling we've experienced in the past."

Russian focus remains on the east, Kostenko said, despite the flurry of attention on the south.

"I always say that the battle for the south is still ahead of us. Though war is unpredictable business, and they could launch a diversion here in the south, we still believe that the current objective for them is to take control of the Donbas."

In the meantime, Ukrainian leaders are urging expanded and accelerated [weapons deliveries](#) from the West to bolster the nascent counter-offensive. Long-range strikes continue, including, reportedly, on key Russian [targets in Crimea](#) that are beyond the capabilities of Ukraine's publicly-acknowledged arsenal (though Russia has [dismissed](#) the explosions as an accident or "sabotage").

Russia still has numerical superiority in the artillery weapons that are shaping the war.

"We have mobilized a large number of people to fight for our country, including around 700,000 soldiers in total, if I'm not mistaken—and now we need to arm them," Kostenko said.

"We need to give them the [weapons](#) they need to defeat the Russians, otherwise all that's left is to go on the defensive, taking greater and greater losses."

"We are asking for continued supplies of ammunition—155mm rounds, self-propelled medium-range surface-to-air missile systems, such as the German Pantsirs, the French CAESARs, similar systems from the U.S., including more [HIMARS](#)."

"That would allow us to stay on the level. But if we want to really rattle the Russians and knock them off the [occupied territories](#), we most of all need longer-range artillery," Kostenko added.

"That includes the ATACMS, which have a range of up to 300km and would allow us to hit their airfields, where their artillery is firing from, as well as their weapons storage facilities and railway hubs. That would put us in a position to really ramp up the counter-offensive."