

Potential Russian Capture of Vuhledar May Provide Key Strategic Advantages
Nick Mordowanec - Newsweek

The Russian army's reported military advances in the Ukrainian city of Vuhledar could shore up strategic advantages in the Donbas region for all of 2023.



Members of a Ukrainian artillery unit pack up after firing a M109 self-propelled artillery unit at Russian mortar positions around Vuhledar from a frontline position on December 19, 2022 in Donetsk Region, Ukraine. Russian forces are focusing on the city for its potential long-term benefits, including control of an important strategic mission in the Donbas region. © Chris McGrath/Getty Images

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Tuesday warned that Russia "is preparing for a new wave of aggression" coinciding with new assaults on Vuhledar as well as Bakhmut.

His apprehension has been compounded by additional reports of small squad-sized Russian assault groups of 10 to 15 troops launching "limited ground attacks" on two main sectors of the front line—in central Zaporizhzhia and in Vuhledar in the western Donetsk oblast, according to the Institute for the Study of War.

Ukrainian journalist Yuri Butusov wrote Thursday on Telegram that Vuhledar is especially pivotal to the Russian Federation's interests.

Not only is it important from a communications standpoint in the southern Donbas region, he said it could also potentially hinder a future Ukrainian offensive on the Crimean corridor.

"The capture of [Vuhledar] will significantly improve the strategic position of the Russian army in the Donbas, and will allow the defense to be deepened," Butusov wrote, according to an English translation.

"The goal of the Russian command in the 2023 campaign is to capture the entire Donbas, or push our army away from the Crimean corridor."

Russia has concentrated its forces by way of marine brigades and airborne troops, he added, going as far as to say the battle in Vuhledar will determine long-term ramifications in the Donbas region and the overall scope of the war this calendar year.

"For us, the successful defense of [Vuhledar] is a task of maximum losses to Russian elite brigades," Butusov wrote. "We remember how the Russians tried to capture Vuhledar for the first time in the fall, and stopped in the village of Pavlivka near the city.

"The Russian regular army is very sensitive to losses, and in the Russian media there was then a wave that the Russian marines were defeated. Vuhledar is a convenient line of defense: It is on the heights, the enemy is advancing from the lowlands. There are opportunities to inflict a new defeat on the enemy."

Mikhail Alexseev, a political science professor at San Diego State University, told Newsweek that Russia's intensified offensive has included a shift of elite forces. That includes Pacific Fleet marines.

"Vuhledar has good defensive positions for Ukraine due to hilly terrain," Alexseev said. "If Russia gets control over it, it would be a painful setback for Ukraine." It is not a new objective for Russia, he added, though it demonstrates an evolution of strategy over several months.

"I'd call it mini-Mariupol combined with the Soviet offensive on Seelow Heights around Berlin during World War II: a combination of frontal and lateral attacks that leverage the advantage in numbers (this time predominantly in manpower, artillery and air power). Every small gain might seem insignificant, but it makes defending more important positions harder for Ukraine," he said.

Time also plays a pivotal role, Alexseev said. Tying up Ukraine's forces and resources in the city and surrounding area allows for Russia to continue to train its troops and bulk up resources—potentially to build large military bases in the captured ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol.

Al-Mayadeen, an independent Arab satellite news network, reported Thursday that Russian officials have openly acknowledged the importance of fulfilling military objectives in the city.

Igor Kimakovsky, adviser to the acting head of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), said on the Russia-based Solovyev Live radio program that [tactics mirror those originally implemented in Soledar](#).

"[Russian forces] entered and gained ground along the outskirts [of Vuhledar], thereby blocking the enemy's forces," Kimakovsky said. "Our artillery is attacking the enemy, who is trying to counterattack."

Yan Gagin, another DPR adviser, told Russia-1 state media that the highway connecting the village of Pokrovske to Vuhledar is under Russian control. He said challenges include the avoidance of mines surrounding underground infrastructure.

"The Vuhledar direction is the Donetsk sector of the front," Gagin said. "The cities of Avdiivka and Marinka are located nearby. By taking Vuhledar, we can cut off the ammunition supply in this direction, as it is precisely from where [Ukrainian troops] strike at Donetsk.

"In addition, it will be possible to inflict both frontal and flanking attacks already from Vuhledar."

Alexseev and Maria Popova, associate professor of political science at McGill University, both expressed hesitance at Russian reports coming from the region.

"Vuhledar is a tiny town (of about 15,000 citizens) that's not on any major strategic route and doesn't hold the key to anything," Popova told Newsweek.

"It has no strategic significance. Russia's goal simply remains to try to capture any Ukrainian territory they could, usually by destroying the settlement completely. Ukraine's goal remains to stop Russia's aggression."

Newsweek reached out to the Ukrainian and Russian ministries of defense for comment.