



EXPLAINERS

The fall of Vuhledar: How Ukraine lost the ‘fortress town’ and what its capture could mean for the war’s future

9:00 am, October 2, 2024 · Source: Meduza

Фото: Gaelle Girbes / Getty Images. Vuhledar seen from a drone. August 22, 2024.

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Russian forces have captured the town of Vuhledar in the southwest of Ukraine's Donetsk region. Fighting over the settlement has been ongoing since late March 2022, when Ukrainian units entered the frontline town. The Ukrainian defense, led primarily by the 72nd Mechanized Brigade, withstood several major assaults by Russian forces over the 2.5 years that followed. However, by fall 2024, the remaining soldiers were forced to abandon their positions under the threat of encirclement. The fall of one of the Ukrainian army's most well-known "fortresses" carries significant symbolic weight. And although the town's capture doesn't pose an immediate threat to Ukrainian defenses in Donbas, its loss could have serious long-term consequences for Ukraine's military.

What we know about Vuhledar's capture

Russian forces, primarily made up of units from the Eastern Military District, first reached Vuhledar from the northeast after several months of intense fighting. There, Russian troops broke through the defenses of nearby Ukrainian brigades that had been holding the road between Kostiantynivka and Vuhledar. They then went on to capture two key defensive

positions to the north of the town — the Pivdennodonbaska 1 and 3 coal mines.

In September, Russian troops also launched an attack to the west of Vuhledar, swiftly taking control of the village of Prechystivka. Following this, the town was almost completely encircled. Its defenders' only connection to the main Ukrainian grouping was the road to Bohoyavlenka, which was under heavy fire — including from anti-tank missile systems.

Despite the situation, the Ukrainian command did not immediately order a retreat from Vuhledar, and the defenders held on for another week. Russian forces began their assault from the east in the second half of September, and by the 30th, they'd also reached the town's western outskirts. It's likely that by this point, the defenders had already withdrawn, as videos released by Russian sources on September 30 and October 1 show no signs of fighting. Russian troops appeared to move freely through the town, raising flags on high-rise and government buildings.

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Vuhledar's strategic significance

From the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Vuhledar served as a key “fortress town,” covering the approaches to the logistics hubs supporting the southern Donbas defense, in particular the city of Kurakhove. Russian forces had a chance to capture it in March 2022, but likely lacked the necessary strength at that time. The vacant high-rise buildings were eventually taken over by advancing Ukrainian troops, who began mining the area and preparing the town for defense.

Without taking Vuhledar, any advance from the south was impossible. The town is elevated and filled with high-rise buildings, providing a clear view for miles over the surrounding open steppe. Additionally, Ukrainian forces used the tall buildings of nearby mines for observation posts and drone operations, while the basements of the high-rises and the mines themselves provided reliable cover for infantry.

By 2022, the Russian command had already realized that the “Vuhledar fortress” was not only holding back their advance but also disrupting Russian logistics throughout southern Ukraine. To the east of Vuhledar lay the Donetsk–Volnovakha–Mariupol railway, which, after the capture of Volnovakha and Mariupol, fell entirely into Russian hands and could have served as an alternative route for transporting supplies to occupied southern Ukraine through Crimea. After the damage

to the Crimean Bridge's rail section on October 8, 2022, this route became especially relevant.

However, restoring the railway, let alone using it, was impossible — the front line was just two to three miles from it, east of Vuhledar. So, the Russian command began preparations to take the town.

THE LEAD-UP

Russia surrounds key 'fortress town' in southern Donbas as battlefield crises mount for Ukraine

In the winter of 2022-2023, a powerful assault by units from the Eastern Military District, including two brigades of the Pacific Fleet's naval infantry, was repelled by Ukrainian forces. Russian troops suffered heavy losses, with the motorized rifle units' armored vehicles hit particularly hard as they advanced through minefields. These units were supposed to provide flank support for the marines trying to break through to the southern outskirts of Vuhledar via a dacha settlement. However, the 155th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade's marines ultimately received no flank support, causing the supply lines to their forward positions in the dacha area on Vuhledar's outskirts to collapse. After several weeks of fighting, the remnants of the Russian assault groups were forced to retreat to their original positions in the neighboring villages of Mykilske and Pavlivka.

After the failed assault, Russia addressed the logistical issue in a drastic way, building a new railway from the country's Rostov region to Volnovakha in Ukraine within a year. Moreover, Russian troops advancing from Avdiivka reached the area north of Kurakhove in early fall 2024 and are now preparing to attack this logistical hub from various directions, though not yet from the southern, Vuhledar, direction.

As a result, the strategic importance of the “Vuhledar fortress,” as it was understood in 2022 and 2023, has diminished. However, this doesn't mean that Russian forces can't leverage the capture of the town in future operations.

What does Vuhledar's fall mean for Ukraine?

The Ukrainian troops defending Vuhledar and its northern approaches (the 72nd Mechanized and 79th Air Assault Brigades) are retreating to positions north of the town (from Bohoyavlenka to the outskirts of the Russian-occupied village of Kostiantynivka). There, they can once again employ one of their favored tactics — targeting Russian forces as they attempt to cross miles of open steppe. The strength of their defense now hinges on the condition of the Ukrainian forces, who have just suffered defeat, were reluctant to leave their doomed positions until the last moment, and were forced to

retreat from Vuhledar and nearby villages and mines under Russian fire.

The situation is even worse to the west of the town, where relatively weak Ukrainian forces are defending the area around the Russian-occupied village of Prechystivka. Russian troops could use this position to launch an offensive on another “fortress” — Velyka Novosilka. Russian troops are already advancing on it from the south and could soon intensify their push from the east. Velyka Novosilka is a key fortified area on the border of Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia regions, and its loss could significantly worsen the situation for Ukrainian forces stationed in Zaporizhzhia.

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