

War in Ukraine

In Attacks on Russia, Ukraine Sends Political Message

By ANDREW E. KRAMER
and MARIA VARENKINA

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine staged a flurry of cross-border ground attacks with tanks and other armored vehicles and long-range drone strikes into Russia on Tuesday, assaults that appeared aimed at disrupting President Vladimir V. Putin's re-election campaign messaging that the war had turned in Moscow's favor.

Three armed groups of Russian exiles who operate in coordination with Ukraine's military said they had crossed the border into southern Russia overnight and were fighting in border regions. Further from the border, drone strikes hit a Russian oil refinery and fuel depot.

Throughout the war, Ukraine has struck targets inside Russia to disrupt military logistics, hit airbases parked on runways and blown up railway bridges. The cross-border attacks, Ukrainian officials have said, are also intended to unnerve Russians and undermine Mr. Putin's efforts to insulate them from the war.

Mr. Putin has through his two and a half decades in power — and through multiple elections, the next of which is scheduled to be held over the weekend — portrayed an image of bringing order to Russia. The Kremlin has also barred the only vocally antiwar candidate from running.

The reported border-area fighting in two regions, Kursk and Belgorod in southern Russia, could not immediately be independently confirmed.

The groups saying they crossed into Russia — the Free Russian Legion, the Russian Volunteer Corps and the Siberian Battalion — coordinate with Ukraine's military. Some members of the groups, including the leader of the Russian Volunteer Corps, hold far-right nationalist views.

Members of two of the organizations, the Volunteer Corps and the Legion, also crossed into Russia last spring to skirmish with Russia's border patrol and military. But whereas that incursion was considered to have a military purpose — diverting Russian forces to the border before a planned Ukrainian offensive elsewhere — the attacks on Tuesday delivered a

Oleksandr Chubko and Ivan Neporukha contributed reporting.



A municipal building in Belgorod, in southern Russia, damaged in a Ukrainian drone strike. — AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

more overtly political message.

A deputy commander of the Free Russia Legion, Maksimilian Andronikov, posted a video on social media describing the incursion as being timed to the lead-up to a presidential election that is set to extend Mr. Putin's tenure into a fifth term.

"We are the same Russians as you," Mr. Andronikov said in the address. "We also have the right to a statement of will."

The group posted a statement on Telegram describing the cross-border assault from Ukraine as an effort to "take our land away from the regime, centimeter by centimeter." Russians, it said, "will sleep freely, not be afraid of the doorbell, and will say what they think without fear. Russians will vote for whom they want, not for whom they should."

The reports of the fighting in the border region coincided with Ukrainian drone attacks throughout central Russia, including a strike on an oil refinery near Nizhny Novgorod, east of Moscow. The refinery operator, Lukoil, said the facility had halted operations but did not clarify why. Another drone strike set on fire a fuel depot near the city of Oryol, south of Moscow.

Closer to the border with Ukraine, an exploding drone struck the City Hall in Belgorod, in southern Russia, the regional governor, Vyacheslav Gladkov, said in a post on Telegram. The attack wounded two civilians.

A spokesman for Ukraine's military intelligence agency, Andriy Yusov, confirmed that Ukraine had launched the wave of long-range strikes, but he did not clarify their intention or confirm specific targets.

Such incidents will occur with everything used for military purposes, one way or another," Mr. Yusov told Radio Liberty. "This work will continue."

The anti-Putin Russian groups posted videos they said were filmed inside Russia, showing tracked, armored vehicles driving in darkness through a forest and soldiers taking cover during a fire-fight.

A soldier with the Siberian Battalion posted a selfie video while lying in a forest saying, "Guys, there's no need to vote at the elections with ballots, let's vote with 7.62 caliber," referring to a common caliber of bullets for Kalashnikov rifles. "Join the Siberian Battalion. Don't be scared!"

The groups claimed to have captured a border village, Tetkino, in the Kursk region. "Putin's army is rapidly abandoning the village," the Legion said in a post on Telegram. The claim could not be independently verified.

In another setback on Tuesday for Russia's military, an Il-76 military cargo plane carrying eight crew members and seven passengers crashed soon after takeoff in the Voronezh region in central Russia, killing all aboard, state news agencies reported. The plane crashed after an engine caught fire, the news agencies reported.

Russian authorities denied the assault had breached the border. The Russian Ministry of Defense said its army soldiers and border guards had "disrupted an attempt by Kyiv to achieve a breakthrough on the territory of Belgorod and Kursk regions," a state news agency, RIA, reported.

The Federal Security Service, a successor agency to the K.G.B. that includes the border guard service, said Russian forces had killed 100 soldiers and destroyed six tanks, 20 armored vehicles and a self-propelled artillery gun, Tass reported. The agency denied the attackers had entered villages inside Russia.

Russia Removes Naval Chief Following Ukrainian Attacks

This article is by Julian E. Barnes, Maria Varenkova and Paul Sonne.

WASHINGTON — The Kremlin has fired its top naval commander, the biggest fallout yet from a series of devastating attacks by Ukraine on Russia's Black Sea Fleet, according to a Ukrainian and a Western official.

Adm. Nikolai Yevmenov, the head of the Russian Navy for the past five years, was removed from command and replaced by the head of the Russian's Northern Fleet.

Russian publications, citing anonymous sources, reported on Sunday that Admiral Yevmenov had been fired. The Financial Times, citing Ukrainian officials, reported the development on Monday. The Russian government has declined to confirm any of the personnel changes.

U.S. officials have assessed that while Kyiv's counteroffensive last year in eastern and southern Ukraine largely failed, its strikes on the Crimean Peninsula and attacks on the Black Sea Fleet were unexpectedly effective.

The victories have been all the more surprising because Ukraine does not have a traditional navy or a fleet of warships. Instead, Ukraine has used sea drones and missiles to attack Russian ships.

U.S. officials believe Ukraine has sunk 15 Russian ships in the past six months. European officials have said the naval victories have reopened the western Black Sea, allowing Ukraine to again ship grain from Odessa.

A Ukrainian military intelligence official said that Admiral Yevmenov's removal from command was directly related to the loss of Russian ships.

Ukraine estimates that a third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, which once numbered 80 ships, has been destroyed since the war began two years ago. The April 2022 sinking of the Moskva, the Russian flagship, with a Ukrainian-built missile was one of Kyiv's great symbolic victories.

But the more recent campaign has been as important for practical gains. As a result of the attacks, Russia has moved its fleet back from Ukraine's coast and out of the western Black Sea.

The Polish foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, said on Tuesday that the Ukrainian military had "basically won the war over the control of the western half of the Black Sea."

"And Ukrainian grain is now again flowing through the Bosphorus to Africa and China, which are Ukraine's traditional markets," Mr. Sikorski told reporters in Washington at a breakfast hosted by The Christian Science Monitor.

At a Senate hearing on Monday, William J. Burns, the C.I.A. director, said Ukraine would be able to conduct more strikes against Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet if the United States provided additional military assistance.

Ukrainian military analysts said the decision to replace the top naval commander was logical, given that Russian efforts to defend its fleet from attacks have failed.

"What did the Russians do to increase the effectiveness of countering our strikes?" Oleksandr Kovalenko, a military analyst, told the Ukrainian news media. "Nothing. They currently have no effective solution to increase the security of their warships. The only viable solution they managed to implement was to flee from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk."

Russian publications have reported that Admiral Yevmenov will be replaced by the head of Russia's Northern Fleet, Adm. Aleksandr A. Moiseyev. Admiral Yevmenov, however, is still listed as the naval commander in chief on the Russian military's website.

"There are decrees classified as secret," the Kremlin spokesman, Dmitry S. Peskov, told reporters on Monday. "I cannot comment on them. There were no open decrees published about this."

It is not the first time that questions about the leadership of the Russian Navy have gone unanswered in public.

In February, Russian Telegram channels that follow the country's military reported that the Black Sea Fleet's top officer had been removed, but he is still listed as the commander of the fleet on the Russian military's website.

Last year, Ukrainian authorities claimed to have killed the same commander, but Russia quickly rolled out footage of him giving an interview to prove he was alive.

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POLITICS & THE NATION

White House tells UnitedHealth to do more to address payment crisis

Hospitals are still reeling 3 weeks after company subsidiary was hacked

BY DAN DIAMOND

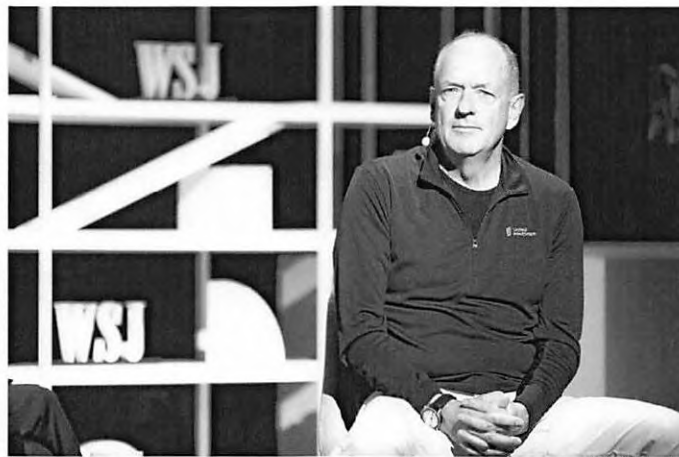
Biden administration officials demanded Tuesday that UnitedHealth Group take more steps to stabilize the U.S. health system following a national health payment crisis that hospitals, doctors and other health-care groups said is threatening their ability to fund their businesses and provide care.

Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, White House domestic policy chief Neera Tanden and other administration officials urged Andrew Witty, CEO of UnitedHealth, and other health industry leaders to make more emergency funding available to affected health-care providers, according to five people who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the meeting.

Becerra and Tanden pushed UnitedHealth and other insurers in attendance to account for the premiums that they are collecting from patients but not paying out to health-care organizations, as unpaid medical bills pile up.

Meanwhile, health-care providers used the meeting to directly voice their payment concerns to Witty and other health insurers and warn about other unresolved problems, such as difficulties obtaining emergency funding from Medicaid plans. Witty also kicked off the meeting by laying out UnitedHealth's response and seeking to reassure attendees about the company's efforts, the people said.

The list of those attending included representatives from the American Hospital Association, the National Alliance of State Pharmacy Associations and the health insurance trade group AHPA, according to meeting notes released by the White House. Government officials who spoke included Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, who discussed forthcoming guid-



UnitedHealth Group chief executive Andrew Witty, seen in 2022 in New York, was urged Tuesday by Biden administration officials to make more emergency funding available to health-care providers affected by a Feb. 21 hack, according to people familiar with the meeting.

ance to state Medicaid officials that will help them be flexible in supporting affected providers. Government officials attended the meeting in person, while industry officials joined remotely, attendees said.

The White House has also approached the issue as a cybersecurity crisis, with health industry leaders warning that the Feb. 21 attack on Change Healthcare — a subsidiary of UnitedHealth and the nation's largest processor of medical claims — represents the most significant incident of its kind in the U.S. health system's history. Hackers stole data about patients, encrypted company files and demanded money to unlock them. Change Healthcare has

been offline ever since, crippling payments to tens of thousands of hospitals, physician groups and other organizations that rely on the company as a middleman.

Government leaders and industry experts said they remain worried about the sensitive patient data stolen by the hackers and the possibility of other breaches. Anne Neuberger, the White House deputy national security adviser for cyber and emerging technology, encouraged attendees at Tuesday's meeting to adopt the Biden administration's voluntary cybersecurity goals.

UnitedHealth did not respond to a request for comment about the meeting.

Senate Majority Leader Charles

E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) and other lawmakers have also pressured the industry to act, warning that the far-reaching crisis has affected pharmacies' ability to fill prescriptions and has put patients' data at risk. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), a longtime critic of UnitedHealth who chairs the Senate's health committee, told The Washington Post that he was considering holding congressional hearings on the matter.

"It's just a question of how we fit it in," Sanders added.

Health-care groups warn they are running out of cash to fund their operations as the payment crisis enters its third week. Hugh D. Durrence, a family physician and pharmacist who is president

of Liberty Doctors, a 50-person medical practice outside Charleston, S.C., said his group is making "day-by-day" calculations about whether it can meet its financial obligations.

Durrence, who said he is not taking a personal salary until the situation is resolved, warned that the crisis is posing an even bigger threat to some organizations.

"I'm aware of providers that are our size and even smaller — this situation could threaten their existence," he said.

The Biden administration has pleaded with UnitedHealth to accelerate emergency funding to affected providers and to be more transparent.

"We urge UnitedHealth Group

to take responsibility to ensure no provider is compromised by their cash flow challenges stemming from this cyberattack on Change Healthcare," Becerra and acting labor secretary Julie Su wrote Sunday in an open letter to health-care leaders. Becerra and Su urged other private health plans to make emergency payments and called for help from other sectors of the U.S. health system, such as other processors of medical claims.

Biden officials do not have statutory authority to compel UnitedHealth and the other groups to make additional payments.

Federal and state officials should "use whatever regulatory and legal and moral authority they have" to compel health insurers to expedite payments, said Kenneth E. Raske, president of the Greater New York Hospital Association, which represents more than 250 not-for-profit hospitals and continuing care facilities in New York and nearby states.

Insurers have defended their response, saying that some demands by providers to rush payments are unnecessary and could lead to fraud and waste. UnitedHealth announced a timeline last week to bring its network back online, saying it expects to begin testing and reestablishing its claims network March 18, but Raske and other leaders said they were bracing for additional weeks of continued disruption.

UnitedHealth has offered an emergency loan program through its Optum unit. However, providers have said the offers are insufficient to meet their needs, and administration officials have pressed the deep-pocketed company to set aside additional funding. UnitedHealth reported revenue of nearly \$372 billion last year.

Federal officials have moved to stand up emergency funding for affected providers. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services said Saturday it will release emergency funds for physicians ensnared in the Change Healthcare hack.

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Karen Chavez, left, the assistant principal of college and career at KIPP Colorado, a charter school in Denver, stands with Andrea, a senior student, on Feb. 28. With the system for college financial aid in disarray, Chavez says she has had to "manage (students') expectations" this year.



Students work on the FAFSA form and website on Jan. 10 in the Bronx, New York. A series of blunders have created a fiasco during the most critical stage of the college admissions season.

Plan to simplify college financial aid instead made it worse

BY ERICA L. GREEN
AND ZACH MONTAGUE
NYT News Service

There were just days left to process a batch of federal financial aid applications when Education Department officials made a fateful discovery: 70,000 emails from students all over the country, containing reams of essential data.

They were sitting in an inbox, untouched.

That discovery last week started a panicked, three-day crash effort by more than 200 of the department's employees, including Richard Cordray, the nation's top student aid official, to read through each of the emails one by

one and extract crucial identifying information required for financial aid. The students' futures depended on it.

"It needs to get untangled," Cordray told his staff members Thursday, according to recordings of two back-to-back meetings that The New York Times obtained. "So, you know, I'm getting pretty impatient."

An exasperated staff member shot back, "We worked all night long — literally — all night."

It was another setback in the botched rollout of a new version of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, known as FAFSA, that millions of families and thousands of

schools rely on to determine how students will pay for college. Three years ago, Congress ordered the Education Department to revamp the new form to make it easier and more accessible. It has been anything but.

For nearly six months, students and schools navigated a bureaucratic mess caused by severe delays in launching the website and processing critical information. A series of blunders by the department — from a haphazard rollout to technical meltdowns — have left students and schools in limbo and plunged the most critical stage of the college admissions season into disarray.

In a normal year, stu-

dents would be sorting through their financial aid offers by now, giving them plenty of time to prepare for the traditional decision day May 1, when many schools expect commitments.

But this is not a normal year.

Karen Chavez, an assistant principal of college and career for KIPP Colorado, a charter school in Denver, said she usually tried to assure students that college is in reach. But she is struggling with that message this year.

"It's hard for us as counselors, having to watch what I say or how I say things," she said, "because I want to guard their hearts and manage their expecta-

tions."

Because of the delays in the FAFSA rollout, schools do not have the information they need from the government to assemble financial aid offers. Students have had to postpone decisions about where to attend college because they have no idea how much aid they will receive.

Many schools are pushing back their enrollment deadlines to give students more time to figure out their finances, throwing college budgets and waitlists into chaos.

The Education Department promised to meet a self-imposed deadline of March 15 to send students' financial information to schools.

But the task is monumental. The department is working with 5 million applications that are in so far, but more than 10 million additional ones are expected to roll in as students make their way through the process, which is still not functioning without delays.

"Financial aid offices across the country are hanging on by their fingernails at this point," said Justin Draeger, CEO of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

Andrea, a senior at KIPP

Denver Collegiate High School in Colorado, will be the first person in her family to attend college. She has her heart set on Duke University.

But first, she has to navigate FAFSA.

"It's agonizing," said Andrea, 17, who asked to be identified by her first name to protect her parents, who immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico and are in the country illegally. "It's deeper than a form. It's our futures."

Her case collided with perhaps the most pernicious flaw in the rollout: The new form froze out applicants who could not provide a Social Security number for themselves or their parent or caregiver, something that had not been an issue with the old form.

To get students with missing Social Security data approved, the Education Department asked applicants like Andrea to submit by email photographs of a driver's license, identity card or other documents that would verify their identity. As the department prepared to announce last week that the Social Security number issue had been resolved, officials realized that the inbox, and its 70,000 emails, had gone untouched.

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LAWMAKERS

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California House Democrats; several lawmakers have bemoaned the decline in female members privately among one another and in interviews.

Four of the five women leaving Congress at the end of the year — Sen. Laphonza Butler and Reps. Grace Napolitano, Anna Eshoo and Katie Porter — will be replaced by men; only Rep. Barbara Lee of Oakland will probably be replaced by a woman. Both retiring men — Reps. Adam Schiff and Tony Cárdenas — will probably be replaced by women.

People are not as attentive to women's representation "because you think the battle has been fought and won. And the reality, of course, is that even at the height, it was still under-represented," said Kelly Dittmar, director of research at Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "Just because you have a woman like a Nancy Pelosi or a Kamala Harris doesn't mean you're at parity."

While the fact that political pioneer Sen. Dianne Feinstein will be replaced by either Schiff or Steve Garvey has generated a wave of headlines, the March 5 primary will have broader and longer term implications. Congress is slowly moving toward gender parity overall, but California is facing the likelihood that its ranks of female members of Congress will shrink as women's rights are being eroded.

The goal isn't that every woman who leaves Congress is replaced by a woman, Dittmar said, it's ensuring that women's voices are at the table. Women's representation is "already starting at such a deficit. And so every loss is acutely felt in a way that it's not the same for men."

Men can represent women's interests, to be sure, and Pelosi said that is why she supported Schiff.

"We cannot lose opportunities to elect women in other places and say, 'Well, you gotta lose in California because it's a man,'" Pelosi told the Chron-



Rep. Adam Schiff has received the endorsement of House Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi in his campaign for U.S. Senate. California is facing the likelihood that its ranks of female members of Congress will shrink as women's rights are eroded.

"Just because you have a woman like a Nancy Pelosi or a Kamala Harris doesn't mean you're at parity."

Kelly Dittmar, director of research at Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University

icle in January. "We want it all. We want the majority, so we have a woman having a right to choose, so that we have child care and family and medical leave and a child tax credit and all the things that affect women, enabling them to be in the workplace. So while some — and I get it — they want a woman senator. Well, I want the strongest possible person for California."

Current and former candidates, advocates who work to elect women and researchers blamed a lack of support and mentorship for potential female candidates and the decisions by some women to endorse and support men over

qualified female candidates.

Andrea Dew Steele, co-founder of Emerge California and Emerge America, which trains Democratic women to run for office, said California elected so many women over the past few decades that "there was absolutely a complacency."

Electing women is a constant fight, Steele said. "You have to stay vigilant. You have to be filling the bench. You have to prioritize gender."

The shrinking number of women has been a topic of conversation for some members of the California delegation, several lawmakers told the Chronicle.

Rep. Zoe Lofgren, who chairs the delegation, pointed to the departures of Eshoo, Lee, Porter and Napolitano and acknowledged that "the number of women in our delegation could go down, actually. ... There is a strong likelihood that some of the female Congress members will be succeeded by — very capable, I'm sure — men. And I do think it's important that the viewpoints of well-educated Democratic women be there."

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's red to blue program — in which certain candidates receive funding and operational support to flip a seat held by a Re-

publican — includes four candidates in California. All four are men, and three are white. In the fifth California race where Democrats could pick up a seat, Democrat Derek Tran is set to face Rep. Michelle Steel, R-County (Orange County).

The most visible change will be in the Senate, where California will be represented by two men for the first time in more than three decades.

Schiff acknowledged that primary voters might factor gender representation into their decision-making, but argued he is the right candidate to fight for California's women.

"People are going to consider gender, and I think they are going to consider race. I think they should consider those things," Schiff told the Chronicle in January before he won the Senate primary. "I also think they're going to consider

Lawmakers continues on A13

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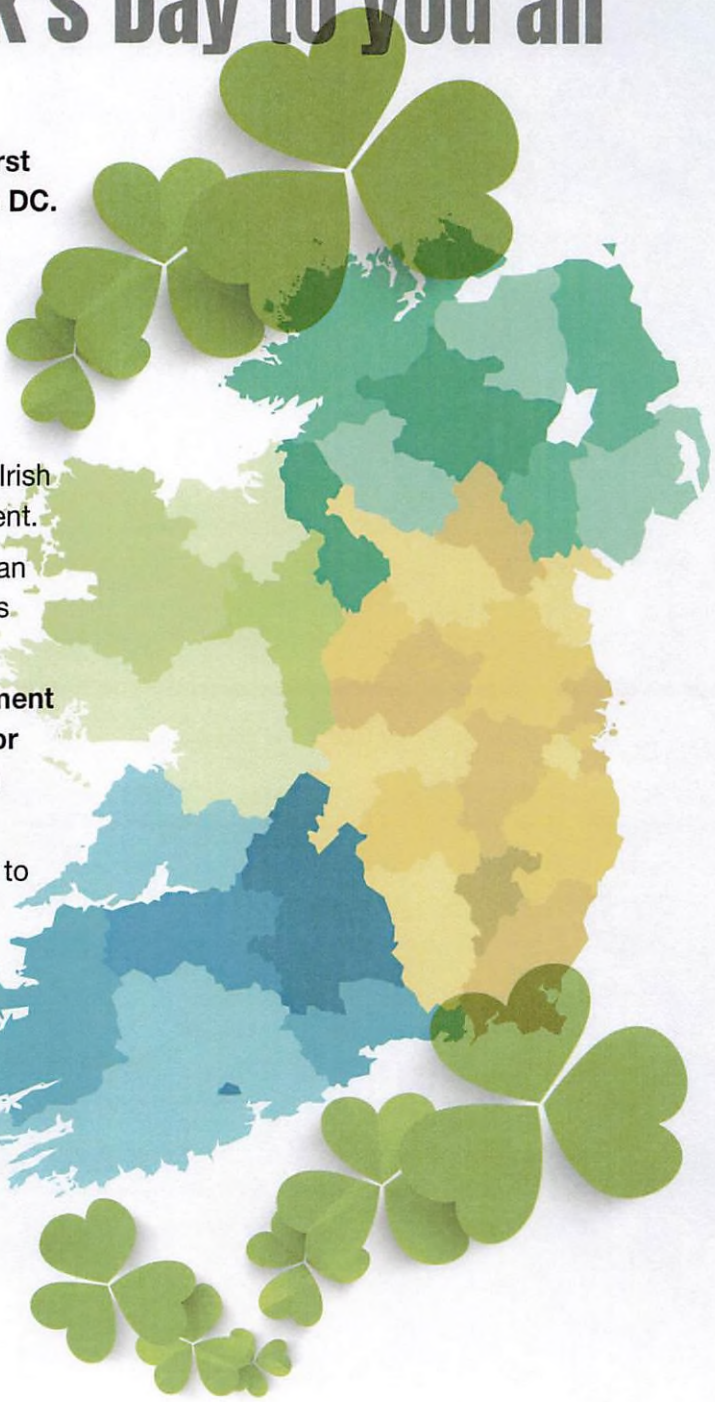
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