

Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 8

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On the eighth day of the fighting, the Armed Forces of Ukraine launched a counterattack towards Kyiv, using the reserve forces (most likely two brigades' worth) which had hitherto been stationed in the western part of the country, securing the border with Belarus from the side of Volhynia. The group displaced the Russian reconnaissance units and reached the Sarny-Kyiv Road (in the areas around the towns of Poliske in Zhytomyr oblast and Kukhary in Kyiv oblast), but it did not break through the defensive positions. The Ukrainians' greatest success was the resistance at Makariv the day before. The Russians are holding back the Ukrainian attack with the forces of two battalion tactical groups (BTG).

Most of the Russian forces (up to 15 BTGs) concentrated in the Zhytomyr and Kyiv oblasts (in the Polesia direction) are continuing the operation to flank Kyiv on the right bank of the Dnieper, conducting activities in the Kozarovychi-Vyshhorod-Fastiv-Obukhiv zone. The Russian units advancing in order to widen the encirclement have reached the towns of Byshiv (the fighting should take place between here and the town of Horenychi bordering Kyiv) and Ukrainka. After many hours of fighting, the defenders of Kyiv pushed the Russians out of the villages of Bucha and Vorzel near Kyiv (the battle for Hostomel is still ongoing), thanks to which they have made it possible to start evacuating the population from the most endangered areas northwest of Kyiv. The encirclement on the left bank of the Dnieper (in the Severia direction) is also being tightened, where 14 BTGs of Russian forces are operating in the Oster-Zazymie-Berezan-Vishensky strip, and the main attack is being targeted at Brovary. On both sides of the Dnieper, Russian troops have advanced to around 50 km from the centre of Kyiv.

In the eastern (*Slobodka*) direction, the Russian forces are continuing their offensive with up to 16 BTGs. The northern grouping is operating from the area around the town of Zinkiv (in the Poltava region, 60 km from Mirhorod), while the southern group is operating from the area around the town of Hadiach (in the Kharkiv region, south of Krasnohrad). The main Russian attack is on Novomoskovsk, north-east of the city of Dnipro. The Russians abandoned some of their positions in the vicinity of Kharkiv, which is now apparently only cut off from the north, and for the first time in many days it was not bombed at night. In the auxiliary direction south of Kharkiv, Russian troops have captured Balakliya. In the *Slobodka* direction, as in the *Severia* direction, there are many besieged and destroyed towns within the Russian operation area, but these have not been occupied by either Russian troops or by the surviving Ukrainian sub-units undertaking irregular operations. For the first time since the beginning of the operation, the Ukrainian defence lines have been broken by the so-called separatists; these have been reinforced by units of the Russian 8th All-Military Army, whose subunits should expand their success in the directions of Novoaidar and Volnovakha

(they have reached Novo-Aleksandrivka in Donetsk oblast, and Starobelsk in Luhansk oblast).

For the first time since the start of the attack on Ukraine, there have been no significant troop movements in the *Taurida* direction. The eastern group is continuing to flank Zaporizhzhia, and is using part of its forces to reinforce the siege of Mariupol. Last night, the Russian sub-unit which had so far been blocking off Enerhodar took control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. As a result, fires broke out in the plant's buildings (these were quite effectively put out), but no radiation hazard exists. The western group is besieging Mykolaiv (last night the defenders apparently destroyed an equipment base at the airport occupied by the Russians), and is continuing its offensive activities from the Voznesensk region. A joint grouping of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea is preparing for a landing operation in the area of Zatoka and Chornomorsk, south-west of Odesa. The Russian air force should have begun destroying Ukrainian firing positions (mainly air defence) in this area. In Odesa the Ukrainians scuttled the Ukrainian Navy's only large combat unit and flagship, the frigate *Hetman Sahaidachny*.

The Russian strike force has brought most of the secondary units into combat. Ukraine is to host 111 out of 117 tactical battalion groups of the Russian Armed Forces, whose presence around the borders of Ukraine (including Belarus) and in the occupied territories was recorded before 24 February. Russia may also have exhausted the stock of Kalibr missiles originally accumulated for the operation. The Ukrainian Air Force has announced that new missiles for the Iskander systems have been delivered to Belarus. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, preparations have begun in Russia to transfer additional forces and resources from the Southern and Eastern Military Districts. The US has provided detailed information on Russia's use of ballistic and winged missiles: of the 480 missiles launched, more than 160 were launched from Russia, 70 from Belarus, and 10 from the Black Sea. The Russian army fired as many as 230 missiles from launchers introduced onto Ukrainian territory.

On 4 March, Ukrainian defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov issued a statement summarising the previous 196 hours of defence, in which, apart from providing information on the successes of the Ukrainian army, Russian war crimes, losses and demoralisation among the aggressor's ranks, he referred to the situation in the fighting areas. He considered it necessary to leave the existing lines of defence ("we had to manoeuvre to save the army") and admitted that the Ukrainian army was taking considerable losses in the ongoing fighting, and still had a difficult period ahead of it.

The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine provided estimates of the Russian army's losses. Since the beginning of the aggression, they have amounted to 9166 soldiers, 251 tanks, 939 armoured vehicles, 105 artillery systems, 50 multi-rocket launchers, 18 anti-aircraft systems, 33 planes, 37 helicopters, 404 motor vehicles, and 60 fuel tanks.

The Ukrainian institutions responsible for security (SBU, Ministry of the Interior) are working intensively to neutralise Russian sabotage groups and Russian military intelligence agencies. The number of arrests of people coordinating the Russian army's rocket or artillery fire has visibly increased. At the initiative of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, as part of the psychological warfare, the website russoldat.info was created – it contains personal data of Russian soldiers involved in the invasion of Ukraine. This is another

initiative aimed at reaching Russian society and increasing its awareness about the true state of the war.

During a session of the Russian Federation's Security Council on 3 March, Vladimir Putin said that the operation in Ukraine was "going as planned", praised the heroism of Russian soldiers, and repeated the lie about Ukrainian "neo-Nazis abusing prisoners". He promised financial support to the families of the fallen and wounded, and stated that Ukrainian society had largely been "stunned by Nazi propaganda." He further stated that in Ukraine, foreign mercenaries are using civilians and "thousands of foreigners" as human shields. He also repeated that the Russian forces are "fighting for Russia", and for the "demilitarisation and de-Nazification of Ukraine", so that "no anti-Russia can threaten us – this also applies to the threat of nuclear weapons." Putin promised to pay 7.4 million roubles (about \$69,000 at the 4 March exchange rate) to the families of soldiers killed in Ukraine and 5 million (about \$47,000) worth of additional benefits, as well as financial support (compensations, pensions) for the wounded and war invalids.

On 3 March, a second round of Ukrainian-Russian talks was held in Belarus. The Russian side has not altered its position on the continuation of the offensive in Ukraine, including its "demilitarisation and de-Nazification". After the meeting, the Ukrainian side confirmed that an agreement had been reached on the creation of humanitarian corridors to evacuate civilians from the places of the fiercest fighting (the defence ministries of both countries are still establishing the details). It has been announced that a further round of talks will take place at the beginning of next week in Belarus. Ukraine has asked the International Red Cross to organise humanitarian corridors out of the besieged towns and cities.

President Zelenskiy once again called on the world to react immediately, to force the Russians to cease hostilities, to close the airspace over Ukraine, and for NATO countries to hand over combat aircraft. At the same time, he called on Putin to hold talks to stop the war. The Ukrainian parliament passed a law providing for the nationalisation of Russian real estate and the seizure of the bank accounts, securities, and property of Russian enterprises and citizens.

According to data from the Polish Border Guard, 99,200 people crossed the border with Poland on 3 March, making a total of 624,500 people since the beginning of the invasion. The Ukrainian Railways are continuing to evacuate residents: most trains are running from Lviv towards Poland, to Przemyśl, Chełm and Hrubieszów; while from Chop they are running towards Hungary. In the evening of 4 March, evacuation trains are to start running from Kyiv to Warsaw. The European Commission has passed a directive giving refugees from Ukraine the right to stay and work in the European Union for up to three years, and to social, medical and subsistence assistance for up to one year. The US also announced a relaxation of its deportation and work permit laws for Ukrainian citizens.

TV broadcasting in Ukraine is undergoing periodic disruptions, and some websites are also being temporarily crashed due to hacker attacks. In Russian-occupied Kherson, Ukrainian TV broadcasting has been completely turned off and replaced by Russian TV. In this city, the aggressors plan to organise a separatist rally, which Kyiv believes may be used to announce a so-called 'Kherson People's Republic' (there are reports of 'actors' being brought in from occupied Crimea to this end). This could lead to clashes with the local population. The Ukrainian people's protests against Russian aggression are continuing: on 3 March,

between two and three thousand residents took to the streets in the town of Prymorsk in Zaporizhzhia oblast, succeeding in driving Russian troops out of the city.

Commentary

- The Ukrainian counterattack from the Volhynia region has not affected the course of the fighting near Kyiv so far. It should be assumed that too little force was used, and the Ukrainian army's potential is too dispersed to execute an effective counter-attack. Nevertheless, in the newly-created *Volhynia* direction, the strengthening of Ukrainian forces will at least delay Russia's moves to take Kyiv. It is an open question as to whether the reserve so far remaining in western Ukraine (and blocking a potential strike from the Brest oblast in Belarus) was included in the fighting because Kyiv was sure that a strike from Brest would not take place, or because the Ukrainian army saw no other way of preventing the Russians from completing their encirclement of the capital. The difficult situation is evidenced by the strengthening of the aggressor in the towns south of Kyiv on both sides of the Dnieper. However, the road through Vasylkiv to Bila Tserkva is still open.
- The fact that Russian troops advancing north-eastwards (in the *Severia* direction) have reached Kyiv, and their approach to the outskirts of Dnipro city (*Slobodka* direction), testifies to the breakdown of the defence lines in left-bank Ukraine. The Ukrainian defence is only effective at individual locations, and it should be assumed that there will be an attempt to withdraw at least some Ukrainian forces (mainly those units equipped with heavy weapons) to the right bank of the Dnieper. As in those areas in the north-east and south of the country which the Russians have so far occupied, most Ukrainian sub-units will remain within the enemy's territory, and will gradually move to irregular activities. After the Ukrainian defence of the left-bank has been broken up, it is an open question as to whether the Russian attack will continue west of the Dnieper line. It should be considered highly probable that an air-sea landing operation near Odesa will be carried out, and that Russian forces will take steps to block Ukraine's principal port, following the example of Mariupol and Mykolayiv. The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, on the other hand, have complete freedom to draw the main line of their subsequent attack either to the north (Kyiv) or to the north-west (Lviv).
- Ukrainian-Russian talks lasting several hours in Belarus did not bring any agreement that could herald an imminent ceasefire. The Russian side does not intend to cease combat operations until it achieves both the political goal – the unconditional surrender of the authorities in Kyiv; and the military one – the complete destruction of Ukraine's military infrastructure. The Ukrainian side treats the consent to open humanitarian corridors as the greater necessity, in order to save the civilian population from the effects of terrorist attacks by the Russian army. The Russians see this as a trick to soften the criticism of the Kremlin for attacking civilians. After the populations have been evacuated, the Russian army will resume its attempts to conquer the besieged towns and cities.
- Despite the deteriorating situation and fears in Ukrainian society, there are still no signs of defeatism. What dominates is the outrage at the actions of the occupier, which are causing more and more victims and destruction, and full mobilisation to resist. In the cities of Western Ukraine (Lviv, Lutsk), new Territorial Defence (TD) brigades are being formed; fortifications are being built, trenches are being dug, and humanitarian aid is being collected. The population is cooperating with the army and the TD, and thousands of notifications about suspicious persons, transport, and plans for sabotage are being

received. Ukrainian men keep returning to their country from abroad, ready to join the fight. Most of the supermarket chains are still operating, and the most important groceries are being supplied. However, the situation is becoming increasingly difficult in the cities besieged by the Russians, including in Mariupol, which is threatened by a humanitarian catastrophe as food supply channels have been blocked and electricity & water supplies have been cut.

- The takeover of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant has reduced its generation capacity to 12%, i.e. to around 700 MW. This may make it harder to meet the demand for electricity, although for the time being this is not a certainty; its consumption dropped sharply from the beginning of the invasion, because many industrial plants stopped working, thus freeing up demand. It is possible that in these circumstances the system operator will decide to disconnect the plant from the network.