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Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 31

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The military situation in Ukraine remains relatively stable for another day. Local successes were recorded by Ukrainian units in the Sumy Oblast, which captured the battle-ravaged Trostyanets and the villages of Krasnopillia and Slavhorod, located on the border with Russia, as well as by the defenders of Kharkiv, who recaptured the village of Vilkhivka, located on the eastern outskirts of the city. In turn, the territorial defence in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast eliminated the aggressor's post and captured the village of Poltavka (north of the previously captured Malynivka).

Russian forces have expanded their area of influence south-west of Kyiv, taking up positions near Boyarka, from where they are shelling villages and the railway line leading south-west (two passenger trains were shelled). More and more enemy sabotage and reconnaissance groups were to infiltrate into the capital. The particularly heavy fighting for the town of Irpin near Kyiv, as well as for the towns in Donbas, has not been resolved (the mayor of Mariupol calls for the full evacuation of residents; the commander of the Azov regiment announces a fight to the finish). South of Izium, the aggressor has not broken through Ukrainian positions (it operates there with forces of up to three battalion tactical groups), but has gained the opportunity to direct reconnaissance subunits towards Slavyansk and south-west towards the town of Barvinkove. In the direction of Donetsk and Lugansk, the defenders repulsed seven enemy attacks. No Russian shelling was reported in the Sumy Oblast. Increased activity of the aggressor's air reconnaissance means, identifying potential targets for missile strikes, is visible in the Odesa Oblast.

The invaders are expanding logistical facilities in Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, up to nine material and technical security battalions are operating in the area of operations, and the aggressor has also organised five logistics centres, although it is still expected to have problems replenishing losses. The Russian army was to bring additional units into Hostomel, as well as develop a grouping on the Ukrainian-Belarusian border. The logistical facilities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces were targeted on another day. In rocket attacks, fuel depots in Lviv (and most likely a military unit there) and in Dubna in the Rivne Oblast were destroyed.

The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation provided an estimate of the losses of Ukrainian forces – by 24 February, 289 unmanned aerial vehicles, 1656 tanks and other combat armoured vehicles, 169 rocket launchers, 684 guns and field mortars and 1503 wheeled vehicles were to be destroyed. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, total enemy losses amounted to approximately 16,600 men, 582 tanks, 1,664 armoured vehicles, 294 artillery systems, 93 multi-track rocket launchers, 52 air defence systems, 121 aircraft,

127 helicopters, 1,144 wheeled vehicles, 7 vessels, 73 fuel tankers, 56 UAVs and 21 operational-tactical rocket launchers.

According to intelligence information, between 50 and 100 wounded Russian soldiers arrive daily at medical facilities in Sevastopol. The moral and psychological state of the aggressor's troops remains low. On the routes of movement of its military convoys through the territory of Belarus, there are frequent cases of selling fuel and provisions or exchanging them for alcoholic beverages. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, the technical condition of combat equipment that the invaders are trying to deliver to units in Ukraine, and which has been stored in reserve warehouses, is unsatisfactory (among other things, due to optical equipment and electronics being stolen).

Russian reservists are receiving text messages en masse notifying them of the start of mobilisation. The Russian Ministry of Defence has admitted that this is an example of 'provocation' by Ukrainian special services, and that all calls are coming from Ukrainian territory. This is another exemplification of the effective disinformation activities aimed at Russian society and intended to sow doubts about the necessity of participation in the war.

On 26 March, on the occasion of the US president's visit to Warsaw, talks were held between the Ukrainian and US foreign and defence ministers in a special "2+2" format, also joined by Joe Biden. These included the closure of American and European ports to Russian ships and the tightening of sanctions. Dmytro Kuleba and Oleksiy Reznikov emphasised the threat Russian missile strikes pose to the Alliance countries. They handed over to President Biden a shard from one of the missiles fired at the international military training ground in Yavoriv near Lviv. The importance of the meeting was underlined by President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who once again demanded that aircraft, tanks and missile defence systems be handed over to Ukraine. He stressed that he was only asking for 1% of the planes and tanks owned by NATO and "lying fallow". He assessed that Moscow had succeeded in intimidating the Alliance.

Speaking remotely at the Doha Forum in Qatar, Zelenskiy called on the world to fight against Russia's nuclear blackmail. He recalled that Ukraine had renounced nuclear weapons without receiving effective security guarantees in return, and Moscow has been using its nuclear status to threaten the world. He called on energy-producing countries to increase exports to break Russia's dominant position and to reform international institutions, including the UN. Speaking in Doha, he stressed that Ukraine is also defended by Muslims living there and once again called on the world to help, comparing the destruction in Mariupol to the tragedy of Aleppo.

The Ukrainian authorities have estimated the losses in civilian infrastructure so far. As a result of the aggressor's actions, over 4,500 houses and about 400 educational institutions, about 100 factories and enterprises and 150 health care institutions were destroyed. Chernihiv was almost completely razed to the ground. On 26 March more than 200 civilians were killed there, and only about 120–130 thousand inhabitants remain in the city (out of almost 300 thousand before the war). Chernihiv is in an encirclement, while the enemy has deliberately destroyed the bridge connecting it with the road to Kyiv.

On 26 March, 5,208 people were evacuated through humanitarian corridors, of which about 4,000 arrived from Mariupol. On 27 March, the operation of two corridors in the Donetsk

(from Mariupol to Zaporizhzhia) and Luhansk (from the town of Rubizhne to Bakhmut) oblasts was agreed. Ukrainian Railways ensured the operation of further evacuation trains from Kharkiv to Ivano-Frankivsk, from Dnieper to Chop, from Kramatorsk to Lviv and from Odesa to Uzhhorod; a free service from Mostyska to Czech Bogumin was also established.

Deportations of civilians to Russian-controlled territories continue – according to Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk, already 40,000 residents of war zones have been forcibly transported to the occupied Donbas, Russia or Belarus. The entire staff of one hospital and a group of children without their parents were deported from Mariupol.

Business is gradually resuming in Kyiv – on March 26, more than 650 grocery shops, 300 cafes, 360 car repair shops and 185 hairdressing salons were operating in the city (information about open shops can be checked in the "Digital Kyiv" app). On 28 March, administrative service centres will resume their activity. At the same time, the process of relocating businesses to the western oblasts of the country is underway – 89 companies have already been relocated from war zones under the programme, and the government has received a total of 1120 applications, of which 368 entities have already been submitted for transport.

According to information from the Polish Border Guard, 2.3 million people have left Ukraine for Poland since the beginning of the war. On 26 March, there were 31.1 thousand of them (an increase of 2.2% compared to the previous day). In the opposite direction, 339 thousand people have crossed the border since the start of the invasion.

Commentary

- Over the past week, the Russian army has begun systematically destroying the hinterland of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Fuel, ammunition and arms depots and barracks facilities have become the main targets of missile and air strikes. Several to a dozen facilities of this type are attacked every day. It is noted that the actions are carried out with precision and, as the local authorities point out, even in the case of attacks on targets within large cities (Dnipro, Lviv, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia), as a rule no damage is caused to residential facilities, while the destruction of targets is usually confirmed. it should be made clear that the aggressors are not motivated by humanitarian considerations, but by purely utilitarian ones – the Russians have twice, in Zaporizhzhia and Lviv, repeated their attack on facilities while a rescue and firefighting operation was underway. For the Ukrainian side, attacks on fuel storage facilities are particularly acute, not only because of the shortage of fuel, but also – in the event of increased supplies from the West – the loss of storage capacity. Why the invaders started destroying the enemy army's hinterland only in the fourth week of the war remains an open question.
- The Ukrainian special services are continuing a psychological operation targeting the moods of Russian society. In addition to passing on information about the significant losses of the aggressor's forces, Ukrainian intelligence tries to undermine the confidence in the actions of the Russian command staff and to lower the morale of conscripts who fear being drafted into units fighting in Ukraine. The effectiveness of this action is indirectly confirmed by problems with spring conscription in Russia.

- The authorities in Kyiv are using all possible international forums to make ever more strident demands for military assistance and to contain Russia more effectively in military, economic and nuclear security terms. Western politicians are being sent harsh messages about giving in to Moscow's threats, while societies and elites are being sent suggestive accounts of Ukraine's humanitarian tragedy, compared to the destruction of Aleppo or even the Holocaust.