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Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 32

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The military situation in Ukraine has not changed significantly. The aggressor is continuing to rotate their forces, withdrawing some of the sub-units which have so far been involved in the combat to their home areas and replacing them with the same kind of units. According to the Ukrainian side, the level of transports from within Russia has fallen significantly (in previous days, sub-units from the Eastern Military District and the Pacific Ocean Fleet, as well as another supply of Iskander missiles, had reached the territory of Belarus). Armed clashes are continuing with varying intensity in all directions, but less and less information is available about their course, and those which are reported on are very general in nature. The Ukrainian side is trying to block reports of the targets and results of Russian attacks on strategic civil and military infrastructure facilities.

In the north-eastern direction, the situation has reached a state of relative calm. In the vicinity of Kyiv, exchanges of fire and Russian shelling & bombing continues. Irpen is still the scene of direct combat, as are the towns around the M06 motorway on the border of the Kyiv and Zhytomyr oblasts. The aggressor's troops have withdrawn from Slavutych, but remain close to the town. The centre of Chernihiv is under constant fire, and clashes are taking place on its outskirts. The town of Nizhyn is also under attack.

In the eastern direction, the main weight of the fighting has shifted to the border between Kharkiv oblast and the Donbas. The Ukrainian defence south of Izium (street battles in the town are continuing) is maintaining the line running between Topolske, Kamianka and Sukha Kamianka, although it is being pursued by Russian units heading towards Slavyansk, where enemy troops are mustering. The amount of artillery shelling on Kharkiv and localities on its outskirts has begun to rise again (the defenders have counted 59 such attacks, in which the invaders have used 180 rockets from multiple rocket launchers among others).

In the south-east direction, the towns controlled by the Ukrainian army in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts – Rubizhne (the defenders have retaken one district of the town), Popasna and Verkhniotoretske (between Avdiyivka and Horlivka) – are still seeing the heaviest fighting. In total, the Ukrainians have repelled five enemy attacks. The next day, Severodonetsk and Lisichansk were shelled, as were several towns to the north and west of Horlivka. President Volodymyr Zelenskiy informed that he gave the defenders of Mariupol permission to withdraw, but they decided to continue their defence of the heavily bombed city. The Ukrainian forces have taken advantage of the relative calming of the situation to focus on preparing the defence of Mykolayiv, Kryvyi Rih (the southern outskirts of the city came under fire overnight) and Zaporizhzhia, where they were continuing to repel the enemy's attacks.

Strategic targets in the west of the country were also attacked for another day. A rocket strike in Lutsk destroyed fuel storages, and another in Zhytomyr hit armaments depots, and probably some armour repair works.

According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the total estimated enemy losses now amount to around 17,000 troops (another 400 in the last 24 hours), 586 tanks (+4), 1694 armoured vehicles (+30), 304 artillery systems (+2), 54 air defence systems (+2), 121 aircraft (+2), 1144 wheeled vehicles (+6) and 66 unmanned aerial vehicles (+10). No increases have been reported in the number of helicopters (127), water craft (7), fuel tanks (73) or multi-rocket launchers (95) destroyed.

The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation has given its own estimates of the losses of Ukrainian forces: since 24 February, these include 308 unmanned aerial vehicles (another 19 since the previous day), 1713 tanks and other armoured fighting vehicles (+57), 170 rocket launchers (+1), 715 guns & field mortars (+31) and 1557 wheeled vehicles (+54).

According to the Ukrainian side, the aggressor has started to build up an ammunition depot in the area of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. According to intelligence information, tens of tonnes of rockets, artillery and mortar shells are being transported from a logistic base in Naroulia in the Homel region. The transport corridor runs several hundred metres from the facilities of the nuclear power plant. The Ukrainians have stated that the occupiers are increasingly using old and substandard ammunition, which could detonate during transport and loading. In Chernobyl, the invaders have deployed a temporary command post for the 38 th Mechanised Brigade and the forward command of the 35thCombined Arms Army from the Eastern Military District. The Russians have set up an ammunition depot near the nuclear power plant, in order to prevent any attempts to shell this location.

Ukraine is tightening its war censorship. The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has called on foreign journalists not to show the effects of Russian air strikes, threatening them with charges of espionage. Ukrainian journalists were also warned that they could be charged with high treason for disseminating any content deemed sensitive. The SBU's imposition of a *de facto* information embargo proves that the problem of disseminating data which could be of value for enemy forces is growing. The appeal is also a consequence of the growing number of missile attacks on towns in western Ukraine which are material and logistic bases for the combatants.

In Enerhodar a local government official has collaborated with the enemy. The current deputy mayor Andriy Shevchyk, a member of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform/For Life (*OPZZh*) party, proclaimed and assumed the leadership of a 'self-organising council' in the town. The remaining representatives of the local authorities have refused to cooperate with the occupier, and the new Russian-controlled authorities do not have the support of the public. The mayor of Enerhodar has accused Shevchyk of treason and stressed that his decision is legally invalid. Another *OPZZh* deputy in occupied Mariupol has also agreed to cooperate with the Russians, explaining his actions in terms of the need to bring humanitarian aid to the city.

Anti-Russian demonstrations are ongoing. On 27 March, the inhabitants of occupied Kherson organised a patriotic demonstration, and Russian soldiers there began firing into the air without warning and using gas grenades. Similar situations have also taken place in

the occupied towns of Kakhovka and Slavutych.

No humanitarian corridors were opened on 28 March, as the Ukrainian secret services have obtained information that the Russians are preparing provocations aimed at disrupting the free movement of the refugees.

On 27 March, President Zelenskiy gave an interview to Russian opposition journalists, but its publication in Russia was banned by Roskomnadzor. In the conversation, he rejected the demands to demilitarise and 'de-Nazify' Ukraine as unworthy of discussion. On the issue of the future neutral status of Ukraine, he considered that it would be necessary to organise a referendum on the matter, on condition that Russia would withdraw its troops to the positions it had held prior to 24 February. He distanced himself from the idea of a peace mission, stressing that the terms of such a mission had not been defined, and that it could lead to the undesirable freezing of the conflict. He concluded that the invasion had caused a deep and irreversible rift between Ukraine and Russia at the social level, and that the demand to grant Russian the status of an official language would not be accepted by the Ukrainian people. The next round of bilateral negotiations is to be held in Istanbul on 29-30 March.

On 27 March, 27,000 people entered Poland from Ukraine (a drop of 13.3% compared to the previous day); 2.323 million people in total have come into the country since the beginning of the invasion. 352,000 people re-entered Ukraine from Poland in the last 24 hours.

Commentary

- The decrease in the intensity of military units arriving from the interior of Russia noted by the Ukrainian side suggests that the troop rotation is coming to an end. Contrary to earlier suggestions, the aggressor's army has not increased in size: in numerical terms, it remains at the current level (up to 150,000 soldiers are directly engaged in Ukraine). The end of the rotation does not mean that the offensive will resume in the manner seen in the first days of the war. It is much more likely that the Russians will maintain the positional nature of their actions, and – if they can break through the Ukrainian positions – will only push forward into the previously designated directions in the country's south and east. The cities of Odesa and Dnipro, as well as Kremenchuk and Kaniv on the Dnieper river, should be considered the main targets that have not yet been attacked by land. It is still expected that the invader will launch another direction of attack from Brest oblast in Belarus into Volhynia and on towards Lviv; whether they choose to do so will depend on the scale and nature of support for Ukraine from the West.
- The Ukrainian army has not been able to carry out a similar process of regrouping and reinforcement. It still has a numerical advantage in the theatre of operations and excellent possibilities for mobilisation, but it has lost a significant amount of its heavy weapons and military equipment (mainly aviation and air defence), and has recently been consistently deprived of fuel & ammunition, as well as the possibility of repairing damaged weapons. The support offered to it in the form of supplies of light weapons may not be enough to continue an effective defence.
- The occupying forces have been making efforts to create local governing structures with collaborators, but this has not yielded any visible successes. Anti-Russian rallies are still

being held in the occupied localities, and most of the local elites have refused to cooperate with the aggressor, despite increasing repression. According to Ukrainian reports, 36 representatives of local governments have been detained, and are considered by the Russians to be particularly dangerous due to their patriotic attitude.

- In his efforts to stop the 'hot' phase of the war, Zelenskiy has once again signalled his readiness to compromise what regards Ukraine's neutral status. However, he has pointed out that such a move would have to be backed by effective guarantees from Western countries, and preceded by the withdrawal of the aggressor's troops. To Russia, a ceasefire is unacceptable at the present stage, and it is likely to treat the next rounds of negotiations as a way to win time to prepare for the next phase of the attack. The Kremlin's overriding goals remain the destruction of Ukraine's military and economic potential, and forcing Kyiv to surrender and make major political & constitutional concessions that would undermine Ukraine's sovereignty in the future.