

Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 54

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On 18 April, the authorities and the highest command of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported that a Russian offensive, which President Volodymyr Zelensky described as the Battle for Donbas, began in the morning hours in the east of the country. The fighting is taking place mainly in the Slobozhansky and Donetsk directions, with the aggressor also conducting missile and air strikes on military and civilian targets in other areas of the country. The activity of enemy aviation was said to have increased one and a half times. The invaders are to continue to introduce new combat units and security subdivisions from Russia's border regions and develop logistics centres and field repair bases. New subdivisions are being formed in the Rostov Oblast and Crimea to support secondary units and protect administrative facilities and critical infrastructure in the occupied territories. They are expected to reach readiness around 24 April.

In the days immediately preceding news of the resumption of the offensive, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine notified of the aggressor's problems with security (it noted, however, that it had managed to stockpile a large amount of ammunition) and replenishing human losses. In the Black Sea Fleet, the 126th Coastal Defence Brigade (mechanised) of the 22nd Army Corps (AC) was said to have lost up to 75% of its personnel, while the 810th Marine Brigade (MB) – recorded 158 dead, nearly 500 wounded and 70 missing from its ranks. 'A significant number' of soldiers from both units were to refuse further participation in the fighting. The contingent rotation of the 68th AC of the Eastern Military District (MD) in Syria was to be transferred due to the operations in Ukraine. Reservists in the Central MD are to be persuaded to sign short-term contracts (3 to 12 months). The Russians are continuing the forced mobilisation in the occupied areas, which began on 1 April in occupied Izyum. There is supposed to be growing discontent among soldiers caused by lack of rotation, equipment failure and poor quality of fuel and food.

According to the US Department of Defense, by 18 April the Russian army had amassed 76 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in Ukraine, a number that was expected to increase by 11 in the last five days. 22 more BTGs are to be deployed in the border regions. 'Nearly a dozen' BTGs are to operate in the Mariupol area, which are to reinforce operations in other directions after capturing the city. The aggressor is also expected to retain the potential to conduct a naval landing operation, but the Pentagon sees no signs of preparing for it. In turn, according to the General Staff of Ukraine's Armed Forces, by April 18 the enemy had introduced 87 BTG into its territory, and the 810th MB of the Black Sea Fleet and the 155th MB of the Pacific Fleet are to be prepared for a landing operation.

The invaders are continuing their offensive operations on the border of the Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts, developing a shock grouping on the so-called Izyum direction. On 18 April, they were to attack Ukrainian positions in Zavody – 15 km west of Izyum – and on the Dmytrivka–Dibrovne line – 15 km north-east of the town of Barvinkove (in total, the aggressor was to carry out four assaults). On April 17 the defenders repulsed five hostile attacks. By April 16, the Russians were to develop attack positions on the line Andriivka–Mala Komyshevukha–Brazhivka–Sulzhivka–Sukha Kam'yanka and launch one hostile attack on Dovhen'ke. In turn, from Borova (30 km north-east of Izyum) they introduced forces into the north-eastern part of the Donetsk Oblast, to be assisted by local collaborators. A partial blockade of Kharkiv continues (with the forces of the 6th CAA of the Western MD as well as the 11th AC of the Baltic Fleet and the 14th AC of the Northern Fleet), which is continuously and increasingly intensively shelled (the mayor called on residents to evacuate). On 17 April, the head of the Kharkiv Oblast military-civil administration reported that the Ukrainian army had partially regained control over Kutuzivka (on the eastern outskirts of Kharkiv) and the villages of Bazaliivka and Leb'yazhe, located east of Chuhuiv. In addition, in the Kharkiv Oblast, Lozova is under fire (evacuation is taking place there and in Barvinkove).

In Donbas, fighting is taking place along the entire line of contact between troops. On 18 April, the defenders were to repel seven hostile attacks. After a three-day assault, the aggressor took control of Kreminna (northwest of Sievierodonetsk), but clashes are expected to continue on its outskirts (according to some sources, Ukrainian soldiers are still defending themselves in the city centre). In addition, in Luhansk Oblast, street battles are continuing in the central parts of Popasna and Rubizhne and in Novotoshkyv'ke. Russian units were also said to have tightened their positions around Sievierodonetsk, and Ukrainian positions (including in Lysychansk and Zolote) are under constant fire – the attacked towns were said to be destroyed by an average of 70%. The head of the Luhansk Oblast military-civil administration is calling on the population in areas that have not yet been blockaded to evacuate immediately. In the Donetsk Oblast, fighting continues for Lyman, 15 km northeast of Sloviansk. Ukrainian positions in the Horlivka area (Niu-York and Toretsk) and west and north of Donetsk (Marinka and Vuhledar and Avdiivka and Ocheretyne) are under attack and shelling, the aggressor is also expected to develop an assault on Kurakhove (15 km west to Marinka). Rocket strikes have destroyed infrastructure in Kramatorsk. The defenders of Mariupol are in the area of the Azovstal combine, which is being shelled and bombed, from where they are appealing to allow the evacuation of about 1,000 civilians, as well as the removal of the wounded and fallen. In turn, the aggressor is to carry out a rotation of the attacking units. On 17 April, the Donbas defenders were to repel a total of twelve, and on 16 April – ten hostile attacks.

Russian forces have intensified operations in the direction of Zaporizhzhia. Ukrainian positions were shelled and attacked along the entire line of troop contact – from the town of Kamianske on the Dnieper River, through the road junctions of Orikhiv and Huliaipole (particularly heavy fighting is to take place there) to Pryutne, bordering the Donetsk Oblast. The last positions of the defenders in the Volnovakha region of the Donetsk Oblast (between the invader-controlled villages of Staromlynivka and Velyka Novosilka) were also shelled. The aggressor's troops operating from Kherson Oblast were to intensify their shelling of Ukrainian positions in Mykolaiv Oblast (on the left bank of the Boh estuary, from m. Lyman,

south of Mykolaiv to the Oblast capital; Ochakiv was also shelled with rocket artillery) and on the border of the Kherson and Dnepropetrovsk oblasts, mainly in the area of Kryvyi Rih (including Zelenodolsk, where a thermal power station supplying the city is located). Clashes are expected to continue over Oleksandrivka in the Kherson Oblast, near the border with the Mykolaiv Oblast. From the areas bordering Ukraine to the north (including Belarus), the invader is expected to conduct radio-electronic reconnaissance, and the threat of rocket-air strikes, artillery fire and the activity of sabotage and reconnaissance groups remains. Russian forces are also to continue reconnaissance activities in the Odesa area. A grouping of enemy ships is expected to operate in the Black Sea, about 200 km from the city.

Missile attacks are continuing across Ukrainian territory, primarily on railway hubs and arms depots. On 18 April, a particularly devastating incident was to occur in Lviv, where both types of facility were targeted. Once again in recent weeks, railway infrastructure was attacked in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (Pavlohrad and Synelnykove). Rockets also struck in the Vasylkiv area of the Kyiv Oblast. On 17 April, targets included Brovary, and on 16 April, Mykolaiv and the Poltava area.

President Zelensky has stated that he will end all negotiations with Moscow if Russian troops crush resistance in Mariupol. The situation in the city is extremely difficult, the aggressor refuses to evacuate the wounded and women and children, and does not allow transports of food, water or medicine. According to Zelensky, the enemy will make attempts to detach the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, create so-called people's republics on their territory, subordinated to the Russian administration, and bring them into the ruble zone. He also called on the West to place the entire banking and financial system of the Russian Federation under sanctions.

Just before the Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine began, State Duma chairman Vyacheslav Volodin declared that President Zelensky should withdraw troops from the east, as well as agreeing to 'denazification' and 'demilitarisation', rejecting cooperation with NATO and recognising Crimea as part of Russia.

The head of Ukrainian military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, said there was no consensus among the senior commanders of the Russian forces on how to conduct the military operation. Fears are growing among them that they will face reprisals in case of further failures on the battlefield. Ukrainian intelligence has data that the enemy is running out of precision missile weapons, and because of the sanctions imposed on Russia, their production is being hampered. The number of refusals to sign a contract for participation in a 'special operation' is said to be growing among the Russian military. Ukrainian intelligence has obtained information proving that among the soldiers in the 150th Mechanised Infantry Division of the 8th Army of the Southern MD, between 60 and 70% of the cadre have refused to sign it. Soldiers who refused to go to Ukraine are subjected to pressure from the political and educational division and FSB military counterintelligence officers. A specific method of persuasion is the offer of gratification in the amount of 3 million roubles if injured on the battlefield. In case of repeated refusal, a note is entered in the personal file stating 'refused to participate in a special military operation on the territory of Ukraine and the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' and threatening that such a decision by the soldier will negatively affect the fate of his family.

In the Kharkiv Oblast, the invaders, in cooperation with local collaborators, organised the deportation of more than 50 inhabitants of Izyum. The latter refused to go to Russia voluntarily – because they did not believe the information being spread about the surrender of Kharkiv and Kyiv – and only under duress did they leave the city. In occupied and devastated Mariupol, the occupiers introduced the order to have special passes allowing movement around the city. Without the appropriate document it will not be possible not only to move between districts, but also to stay on the street. The introduction of the new procedure makes it easier for the aggressor to create a census of people remaining in the city – it can be used to draw up lists of residents to be forcibly deported to Russia. According to the communications provided by the Ukrainian authorities, humanitarian support, widely advertised by the occupiers, is limited to the issuing of a loaf of bread and a bottle of water per day. The invaders are not allowing any Ukrainian or international humanitarian aid into the city.

According to the Ukrainian Centre for Combating Disinformation, the self-proclaimed occupying authorities of Crimea have set up 're-education camps'. Exiled teachers from the Kherson, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia oblasts will be forcibly trained according to Russian educational standards. The policy of compulsory Russification is also to be extended to Ukrainian children and young people who will attend Russian courses. In the occupied territories, the invaders plan to reopen educational institutions and remove the teaching of the Ukrainian language, Ukrainian literature and Ukrainian history from the curriculum. The authorities in Kyiv warn that participation in the implementation of the Russian 'educational plan' will be considered an act of collaboration.

On 16 April, 1,449 people were evacuated from war zones through humanitarian corridors. 1381 arrived by their own transport to Zaporizhzhia, including 170 from Mariupol, and 1211 from the Zaporizhzhia Oblast (including Berdiansk). Despite constant shelling, 68 people were evacuated from Sievierodonetsk, Rubizhne and Kreminna in Luhansk Oblast. Removal of people from Lysychansk was prevented by massive shelling. Humanitarian corridors have not been operational since 17 April and the aggressor forces refuse to open them. There is a constant threat of shelling of the evacuation routes. The Russians refuse to make the corridors available to the civilian population of Mariupol.

On 18 April, the Russian defence ministry said that more than 863,000 residents of Ukraine and the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics had been deported to Russia since 24 February. The military claims that the database of people who want to leave for Russia allegedly includes 2.75 million people from 2,128 localities. This figure is highly unlikely. Its release to the public may mean that the aggressor intends to continue forced deportations and implement a plan to depopulate the occupied territories.

Infrastructure Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov estimated that 20-30% of the country's infrastructure had been damaged or destroyed, including over 300 road bridges, 8,000 km of roads and dozens of railway bridges, and the cost of reconstruction was estimated at \$100 billion. According to the energy ministry, 813 towns and 676,000 people remain without electricity, and 258,000 consumers without gas. Presidential adviser on economic affairs Oleh Ustenko announced that Ukraine had asked the G7 countries for \$50 billion in budget support (earlier the authorities had suggested that the budget needed \$5-7 billion a month). Zelensky had a telephone conversation with International Monetary Fund director Kristalina

Georgieva about financial support and the country's post-war reconstruction plans.

The Office of the President said that Ukraine had completed the questionnaire handed over by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen on 8 April. The document is to be the basis for the body's assessment of Ukraine's readiness for EU candidate status. Von der Leyen said in an interview that the country has the basis to win the war with Russia, she also stressed the need for those guilty of war crimes in the occupied territories, including Vladimir Putin, to be held accountable.

The 'derusification' of public space in Ukrainian cities continues. The Lviv City Council has initiated a process to rename 30 streets associated with Russia or Russians. A working group has been set up and will present its first proposals in May. In Kharkiv, a monument to USSR Marshal Georgy Zhukov was dismantled. In turn, the invaders are 'Russifying' the occupied territories – a monument to Lenin has been restored in occupied Henichesk.

According to data from the Border Guard Service of the Republic of Poland, since the beginning of the war, 2.84 million people have left Ukraine for Poland, and on 18 April – 20 thousand (an increase of 16% compared to the previous day). On the same day, 14.4 thousand travellers were checked in the opposite direction, and since 24 February – 738 thousand. According to the Ukrainian State Border Service, on 17 April, more people arrived in Ukraine (29 thousand) than left it (28 thousand). More than 1 million people have returned to the country since the beginning of the aggression.

Commentary

- The launch of a new Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine, first announced on the morning of 18 April by the head of the Luhansk Oblast military-civil administration, did not significantly shift the positions of the two sides. There was, however, the seizure of Kreminna and the development of an offensive grouping on the north-eastern outskirts of Slavyansk, as well as the consistent pushing of the defensive line towards the town of Barvinkove. The relatively balanced messages and comments coming from Kyiv suggest that the Ukrainians are reckoning with the aggressor's advances in the Donbas, especially the capture of Mariupol. The direction in which the invading forces currently operating in Mariupol (should its defences collapse) could be deployed remains an open question, as Russian activity has increased along the entire length of the military contact line, including in the direction of Mykolaiv, Kryvyi Rih and Zaporizhzhia. The relatively calmest section of the fighting is currently around Kharkiv, but the city itself is being systematically destroyed, mainly by artillery fire.
- Information from Ukrainian military intelligence signals that the prolonged clashes are negatively affecting the morale of an increasing number of Russian soldiers. This is due to the scale of casualties suffered by the aggressor and the lack of faith in a quick victory. Various forms of persuasion are being used to break down the reluctance to fight – from financial encouragement to threats that refusal will make personal and professional life difficult for families.
- The launch of the Russian offensive in the Donbas has worsened the humanitarian situation in the region and is preventing the continuation of organised evacuation of civilians. This is evidenced by the appeal of the head of the administration of the Luhansk

Oblast calling for an independent flight from the areas threatened by the fighting. The aggressor forces broke off contacts with the Ukrainian side on the issue of providing security guarantees for humanitarian corridors, ignoring the consequences of the increase in civilian casualties.

- In recent days, there has been an upward trend in the number of refugees returning to Ukraine. At present, the sustainability of this trend cannot yet be determined, since – although it is linked to the release from occupation of the Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts – it is also influenced by the approaching Orthodox Easter. However, the intensification of hostilities in the east of the country, especially in the vicinity of large cities such as Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia, may trigger another wave of refugees.