

Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 62

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The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine has confirmed further advances by the aggressor in the areas of the most intense fighting at the junction of the Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The invading forces have developed success on the right wing of operations towards the town of Barvinkove, breaking through the defences in Zavody and approaching the village of Velyka Komyshevukha. In addition, they increased the grouping in the Izyum area by two battalion tactical groups. In the Donbas, the Russians are continuing their assault in the direction of Sloviansk, where they have completely driven the defenders out of the village of Zarichne, and also – after seizing the village of Novotoshkyve – on Ukrainian positions south of Sievierodonetsk. However, the aggressor has to pay for the progress with heavy losses. Clashes, shelling and bombardment also continued on other lines of operation in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts and on the border of the Kherson, Mykolaiv and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts. The defenders were said to have restored control over three villages west of Snihurivka in Mykolaiv Oblast, while the Operational Command 'South' reported shelling of enemy positions on Snake Island.

The Russians continue their attacks on critical infrastructure facilities. A railway bridge over the Dniester Estuary in the Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi area, on the main support route from Romania, was destroyed by a double rocket strike. Rockets also hit Poltava. The Kryvyi Rih Thermal Power Plant in Zelenodolsk became the direct target of artillery fire in the south of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast for the first time. The invaders are also trying to increase their reconnaissance capacity of Ukrainian positions by all means, including through intimidation and abuse of civilians – for example, they are forcing women to locate resistance points, threatening to shoot their children.

A fire broke out at an ammunition depot in the Belgorod Oblast. The cause of the incident remains unknown. This is yet another incident related to the destruction of a critical infrastructure facility in this Oblast, wherein a high terrorist threat level has been introduced. The Federal Security Service detained two Russian citizens, alleged supporters of 'Ukrainian Nazism', who were supposedly planning to damage the railway track. These events are being used by Russia to support the claim that Ukrainian forces are acting aggressively on its territory, threatening the safety of civilians.

An operation by Russian special services aimed at destabilising the situation in Transnistria is underway. According to Russian media, weapons were used in the Kolbasna area, where Russian ammunition depots are located, and several Ukrainian drones were allegedly spotted at night. According to President Volodymyr Zelensky, reports on successive incidents in these areas and suggestions that Ukraine is behind them are intended to force

Chişinău to withdraw its support for Kyiv. The putting on alert of Russian and separatist troops in Transnistria (a total of around 1,400 men) is intended to create the impression of preparation for an attack on the Moldovan capital.

On 26 April, Mariupol defenders reported that 35 air strikes had been carried out on Azovstal facilities, with people trapped under the rubble. The city authorities reported that 2,000 civilians are at the site and published drastic photos of the makeshift hospital deployed there, where medicine is in short supply and sanitary conditions are dramatic. Some defenders trapped in Azovstal are beginning to accuse the authorities in Kyiv of having betrayed them and left there to die. Meanwhile, the Kremlin continues to build a false narrative around the situation in Mariupol. Putin claimed that the city had been 'liberated' by the Russian army, stating that Kyiv should order the defenders from Azovstal to lay down their arms and that Russian forces were ready to guarantee their rescue.

The Russians have appointed occupational authorities in Kherson – Volodymyr Saldo (mayor of the city in 2002–2012 and MP from the Party of Regions) has been appointed head of the regional administration, and Oleksandr Kobets (driver of the previous mayor) has been appointed mayor. These moves are part of preparations for a pseudo-referendum, which is to facilitate the establishment of the so-called Kherson People's Republic. However, the actions of the occupiers did not reduce the protest mood in the city, and on 27 April another pro-Ukrainian rally was held there. It was dispersed with the use of flash-bang grenades and tear gas (four people were injured). In the occupied towns of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, an order was issued to introduce the Russian curriculum in schools as of 2 May. According to Ukrainian reports, dozens of pedagogues have resigned in order to avoid cooperation with the enemy.

The visit of UN Secretary-General António Guterres to Moscow on 26 April ended in failure. Russia rejected a proposal to set up a trilateral contact group (Russia, Ukraine, UN) to organise humanitarian corridors. On 25 April, Guterres visited Turkey, where he discussed peace talks between Ukraine and Russia with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and on 27 April he met with President Andrzej Duda in Rzeszów. He is due to visit Kyiv on 28 April.

On 26 April, the 36th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, three Russian missiles flew over three Ukrainian nuclear power plants. President Zelensky stressed the need to ensure global control over Russian nuclear facilities and technologies. He pointed out that after what the Russian military did in Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants, the world cannot feel safe. Foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba stressed that Russian threats to use nuclear weapons are induced by failures in the war with Ukraine, and appealed not to succumb to fear.

On 26 April, for the second consecutive day, no evacuation corridor was operational. The Ukrainian side was concentrating on evacuation from Mariupol, seeking the activation of two corridors: one for residents of the city and the other for those taking shelter at the Azovstal plant. On 27 April, Ukrainian Railways is running evacuation services on six routes from the east to the west of the country.

According to the Polish Border Guard, 2.98 million people have left Ukraine for Poland since the beginning of the war, and 21.4 thousand on 26 April (a 56% increase on the previous day). In the opposite direction the border was crossed by 15.4 thousand people yesterday,

while since 24 February – by 886 thousand.

The Ukrainian government, with the participation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, will launch another programme to support internally displaced persons, under which each such person will receive a benefit of 2,500 hryvnias (\$85). According to estimates by the authorities, almost one million citizens are eligible for this benefit, people from occupied territories and combat zones in the first place. Another government programme is already in place to pay 2,000 hryvnias (\$68) to each adult displaced person and 3,000 hryvnias (\$102) per child.

Commentary

- No signs of the previously announced massive Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine does not mean that the situation on the line of contact between the troops is not changing. At the junction of the Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, which is currently the main battleground, the aggressor is repeating its attacks and is increasingly successful in pushing defenders from successive villages. However, Russian advances are minor, a few kilometres per day, and most likely at the cost of heavy losses. Ukrainian reports indicate that the enemy's forces are being systematically reinforced, allowing them to continue operations as before. The observed Russian advances testify to the growing exhaustion of the defenders, caused not only by permanent attacks and shelling, but also by the increasing difficulties in providing support and supplies due to repeated enemy strikes on warehouses and critical infrastructure (especially transport). The ability of the Ukrainian army to carry out unit rotations in the most vulnerable areas remains an open question.
- The tense situation around Transnistria has provoked some media suggestions that the region may become another theatre of war. This causes concern to the authorities in Chişinău, who wish to remain neutral and prevent Moldova's direct involvement in the conflict. It has to be stressed, though, that a scenario involving a Russian naval landing in the western part of the Odesa Oblast, the capture of Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi and the opening of the road to Chişinău would be difficult to implement. To carry out such an operation would require the support of a land-based grouping of Russian forces towards Transnistria, which is not possible in the current situation.