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Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 83

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Russian forces pushed for another 24 hours against Ukrainian positions in the Donbas, which remains the main arena of fighting. Outside it, clashes occurred north of the town of Barvinkove, the only consistently aggressor-attacked area of the Kharkiv Oblast. Skirmishes continued on the Ukrainian-Russian border in the Sumy Oblast (in the Shostka Raion), triggered by attempts by the occupation's sabotage and reconnaissance groups to break it. On all directions of operations and in the border areas of the Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts, the aggressor army continued to shell and bombard the defenders' positions (especially towns on the outskirts of Kharkiv and Mykolaiv). However, the main targets of Ukrainian artillery were enemy positions on the border of Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts. Rocket attacks occurred in the city of Dnieper (railway infrastructure) and in the Odessa Oblast.

Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov has once again called on the international community to supply arms 'as quickly as possible and in the quantities needed'. He reported that the enemy was preparing for a prolonged military operation – in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts it was to create lines of fortifications on which it could move to defend itself if necessary. As of 24 February, 167,000 Russian troops were to take part in the operation in Ukraine, with 91 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) directly involved in combat operations. Reznikov added that in one-two months the aggressor could use 55 BTGs from the reserve or after restoring combat capability.

The Chief of Staff of the Territorial Defence (TD) General Serhiy Sobko said that its numbers have reached 110,000 soldiers. Of the 32 existing brigades of the TD, 25 are fully or partially involved in military operations. They receive armaments supplied from Western countries (including portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft rocket sets) and according to Sobko, they played a significant role in the defence and liberation of the Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts and in the fightings for Mariupol. The TD also includes municipal volunteer formations, of which more than 700 have been formed so far; more units could be created depending on the situation.

Deputy Defence Minister Hanna Maliar' confirmed that the rescue operation of Azovstal defenders is ongoing and there is currently no other way for their evacuation other than through Russian-controlled territory. According to Ukrainian sources, 264 soldiers, including 53 wounded, were taken out of the facilities. In turn, the Russian defence ministry stated that 959 Ukrainian servicemen had left Azovstal. Despite Ukrainian announcements of seeking an exchange of defenders for Russian prisoners of war, on 18 May the State Duma of the Russian Federation is to vote on a resolution prohibiting the exchange of 'Nazi criminals', and on 26 May the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation is to rule on

recognising the Azov regiment as a terrorist organisation (the adoption of both decisions seems certain).

Oligarch Rinat Akhmetov announced that his SCM holding company had lost more than $20 billion as a result of the aggression, $10 billion of which is attributable to Azovstal and the Ilyich metallurgical combine in Mariupol. The authorities of the self-proclaimed so-called Donetsk People's Republic have announced that the Azovstal plant will be demolished, while the Ilyich complex will be rebuilt. During his visit to occupied Kherson, Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian government Marat Khusnullin announced the reactivation of the region's economy and the sale of local agricultural produce to 'provide cash to the population'.

The Security Service of Ukraine informed it has successfully dismantled of a Russian intelligence network that was supposed to allow diversionary groups to infiltrate Mykolaiv. Coordinated by a general of the occupation forces, the group was to consist of women – former Ukrainian soldiers from units stationed in the region. They were to obtain secret information about the stationed Ukrainian units, the local socio-political situation and the effects of rocket attacks. After completing their tasks, some of the female agents were to be evacuated to Crimea, while others were promised leading positions in the local administration after the Oblast is taken over by Russian troops.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko announced that peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow are not continuing in any format because 'Ukraine has effectively walked out of the negotiation process'. In response, adviser to the head of the President's Office Mykhailo Podolyak confirmed that they had been halted because of Russia, which 'inadequately addresses events' and 'refuses to understand that the situation in Ukraine is no longer what it was at the beginning of the war'. According to Podolyak, the Kremlin does not want to admit defeat, fearing a negative public reaction. The politician also stated that Kyiv will return to the negotiating table when it receives concrete proposals from Moscow to resolve the conflict. In turn, the head of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, Dmytro Kuleba, stated that the successes of the Ukrainian army are conducive to adopting a firmer stance towards the occupier.

French President Emmanuel Macron announced in a telephone conversation with Volodymyr Zelensky that Paris plans to increase military aid to Ukraine in the coming weeks. He also assured of full readiness to give it all necessary military, humanitarian, economic and financial support. In turn, the head of EU diplomacy Josep Borrell announced that Ukraine will receive the next tranche of funds for the purchase of weapons in the amount of 500 million euros, and that the EU will not allow the invaded country to remain unarmed in the war with Russia, and will give it as much aid as is needed to win.

The Polish Border Guard reported that on May 17, 20,000 people were checked at crossings from Ukraine to Poland (a 5% increase compared to the previous day), while in the opposite direction – 26,000. Since the beginning of the invasion, 3.4 million people entered Poland from Ukraine, while 1.3 million people entered Ukraine from Poland.

Commentary

- For several weeks now, Russian offensive actions outside the Donbas have not had the scale or character which would indicate a desire to seize more territory. Even when

Russians achieved partial success, giving them the possibility of launching attacks in further directions – as reported by the Ukrainian side (Komyshuvakha in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Novopavlivka in the Dnepropetrovsk Oblast) – their actions were not continued. The invaders limited themselves to the so-called improvement of the tactical situation and expansion of defensive positions (at present there are two defence lines on each side in the Zaporizhzhya Oblast). However, US intelligence reports evidence that Russia is not giving up its plans for further expansion in the directions of Zaporizhzhya, Kryvyi Rih and Mykolaiv. According to these reports, the aggressor has concentrated the largest grouping of troops on Ukrainian territory (over 50 BTG) in the left-bank part of Kherson Oblast and Zaporizhzhya Oblast. It should not be ruled out that before the next strike occurs, Moscow will pretend to not only limit its operation to the seizure of Donbas, but also, in the case of the seizure of the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts, to try and conclude a truce analogous to the situation in 2014–2015.

- Despite the efforts made by the Ukrainian side for the release of the Azovstal defenders and Ankara's attempts to mediate for their evacuation via Turkey, Russia is not ready to exchange prisoners of war and seems determined to deport them to its own territory as soon as possible. Under the guise of a humanitarian gesture (evacuation and treatment of the wounded), Moscow intends to make maximum propaganda use of the imprisonment of the now legendary defenders of the combine, to portray them as 'neo-Nazis' and probably to organise a show trial and force them to cooperate in order to discredit Ukraine.
- The statements by Ukraine's representatives confirm Kyiv's determination to resolve the conflict by military means. In the Ukrainian perception, time is now playing in favour of the Ukrainian armed forces, which, thanks to the Western military aid received, are able to inflict significant losses on the enemy army, or even oust the occupier altogether. Kyiv hopes that the military defeats and the expected effects of Western sanctions on the Russian economy will force Moscow to abandon its ultimative tone during the talks and adopt a more constructive negotiating stance.