

Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 92

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For the next 24 hours, the heaviest fighting is taking place at the junction of the Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Russian forces have approached Bakhmut from the south-east, and the defenders are resisting them in the vicinity of the villages of Pokrovske and Klynove (10–15 km east of the city centre). To the northeast of Bakhmut, there is fighting for control of the road to Lysychansk (in the Berestove–Bilohorivka area in the Donetsk Oblast) and the breakthrough of Ukrainian positions near the regional border (Komyshuvakha–Nyrkove in the Luhansk Oblast). The Russians are not giving up their attempt to encircle the Sievierodonetsk region from the north and are preparing another landing via Donetsk. In Luhansk Oblast, the invaders have entered the city (fighting is taking place in its north-western part) and are making attempts to bypass both it and neighbouring Lysychansk from the south. In the Donetsk Oblast, on the other hand, Russian forces, having captured Lyman, are attacking Ukrainian positions to the south (towards Sloviansk) and south-east (Siversk–Bakhmut) of the city. The other directions are dominated by shelling and bombardment of Ukrainian positions and hinterland. There has been the most serious shelling of Kharkiv and surrounding towns for several weeks. In addition, the enemy is said to be conducting aerial mines on potential routes of march for Ukrainian units. The target of the rocket strikes was Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. According to Ukrainian military sources, mainly railway infrastructure facilities have been attacked in recent days.

The Kremlin has for the first time officially confirmed its intention to annex territories seized after 24 February. Its spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow expected Kyiv to accept Russian claims to the occupied territories. He considered it a non-negotiable issue and urged the Ukrainian authorities to recognise the actual situation in the occupied territories. Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation Andrei Turchak announced that a special economic zone is planned in the Donbas and in the territories of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in order to integrate the economy of these territories into the Russian economic space. Further confirmation of the annexation intentions is the assignment of telephone numbers in the above-mentioned oblasts to the Russian prefix '+7' and the servicing of telecommunications services only by Russian operators.

The US Department of Defence has reported that since 9 May the number of Russian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) engaged in Ukraine has increased from 97 to 110. The southern grouping (in the left-bank Kherson Oblast and Zaporizhzhia Oblast) is still expected to be the largest, while the forces of the other aggressor groupings (western, central and eastern) are expected to be of similar size. The Pentagon estimated Russian losses at nearly 1,000 tanks, more than 350 artillery systems, 'nearly three dozen' combat

aircraft and more than 50 helicopters (Ukrainian losses were not given). The defenders were to use 85 M777 howitzers (out of a total of 108 transferred; 190,000 of 209,000 155 mm ammunition were delivered), 9 Mi-17 helicopters (out of 11) and 73% Switchblade circulating munitions in the fighting.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka has decided to create a Southern Operational Command. This will be the third such structure, so far there have been two operational commands: Northern Command in Grodno and Northwestern Command in Borisov. The reason for modifying the military structures is said to be the 'military pressure' on Belarus from NATO. Lukashenko's decision proves that the task of the Belarusian army in the conflict with Ukraine is to block its border with Belarus and to shield Russian forces from possible attacks by Ukrainian sabotage groups.

Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine Oleksiy Danilov has warned that the aggressor's special services are changing tactics and plans for internal destabilisation of the situation in the country. The special operation, which has been given the code name 'Chameleon', involves the activation of agents posing as people with patriotic views. He stressed that collaborators of Russian services in Ukraine have a large number of weapons at their disposal. Danilov's statement shows that agent activity is still a serious threat to state security. Attempts at destabilisation may take the form of actions 'under a foreign flag', for example, organising territorial defence units, which in reality will fulfil the role of Russian diversionary units.

The Ukrainian interior ministry reported that around 500 criminal proceedings had been opened in cases of collaboration (the largest number in the Luhansk and Kyiv oblasts – 162 and 68 respectively). The Ukrainian authorities have warned those collaborating with the Russians that in addition to criminal liability in domestic courts, they risk being instrumentalised without any guarantee of their safety.

On 26 May, a telephone conversation took place between Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi and President Vladimir Putin, during which the Russian president stated that Russia is ready to resume grain and fertilizer exports on condition that Western sanctions are lifted. According to media reports, Turkey is negotiating with Kyiv and Moscow to create a corridor for grain exports from Ukrainian ports. The topic was also raised during a conversation between Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The Kyiv-based International Institute of Sociology has published a survey on Ukrainians' attitudes towards Russia. In comparison with the survey conducted at the beginning of the war, the number of those who feel positively about the country has fallen from 34% to 2%, while those who feel negatively about it has risen from 50% to 92% (6% have no opinion). The regional differences are relatively small – people in western (93%) and central (95%) Ukraine are most critical of Russia, while in the rest of the country this figure is lower (90% in the south and 85% in the east). A new survey was also conducted among people who were positive about Russia in February this year. The survey shows that 80% of them now have a negative attitude to Russia, and only 8% maintain their current views.

Commentary

- The Russians have consistently sought to encircle and destroy the Ukrainian grouping in the Sievierodonetsk area, and the region of most intense operations remains the Donbas. Pentagon information – partly confirmed by local Ukrainian sources – indicates that the additional forces being introduced into Ukraine are directed not to the areas of heaviest fighting, but mainly to the right-bank (north-western) part of the Kherson Oblast. While at the beginning of May the western grouping of Russian troops deployed there numbered 5 BTG, their numbers are now expected to be comparable with the central (Donbas) and eastern (Kharkiv Oblast) groupings, each comprising around 20 BTG. This indicates that the Russian command is convinced of the imminent capture of Donbas (or at least that there is no need to reinforce the grouping operating there) and is preparing its forces to strike in the northern (Zaporizhzhia, Kryvyi Rih) and/or western (Mykolaiv, Odessa) directions. However, the Russians' focus on attacking the defenders' supply lines (the railway still plays a major role) indicates that they fear further deliveries of heavy weaponry and military equipment from the West, which could thwart their operational plans not only in terms of the directions of the further offensive, but also the capture of Donbas.
- The Kremlin's plans for the future of the occupied territories are crystallising. Peskov's statement should be seen as support for the emerging concepts of ending the war in exchange for territorial concessions to Ukraine and allowing its partial partition. Declarations by representatives of Russian officials and 'integration' activities undertaken in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts prove that the Russian forces – without waiting for a formal political decision from the Kremlin – are building organisational foundations to justify its undertaking in the coming months. The realisation of this scenario will be presented as a victory for Russia capable of continuing its policy of merging the 'Russian lands'.