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Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 144

Krzysztof Nieczypor, Jadwiga Rogoża, Sławomir Matuszak

Russian troops regularly shell border towns in the Chernihiv, Sumy and Kharkiv oblasts. These are preceded by intelligence activities carried out, among others, using Orlan-10 drones. Particularly intensive shelling has taken place in Kharkiv and north and east of that city, along the Donec River floodplain. The latter direction should be linked to the intention to prevent the crossing of Ukrainian forces and to disrupt the Belgorod–Izyum lines of communication.

The aggressor army is attempting to take control of the route leading from Izyum to Sloviansk from the north-west, shelling the surrounding villages. The defenders were to repel the attack in the Kurul'ka area and also north of Sloviansk, in Bohorodychne. At the same time, the invaders are trying to gain convenient positions to surround Sloviansk from the north-east. Fighting is taking place on the line Hryhorivka–Verkhnokamyanske–Ivano-Dariivka–Spirne. The Russians are also conducting intensive operations on the Lysychansk–Bakhmut route and south of Bakhmut, aiming to surround Sloviansk and force the defenders to withdraw towards Kramatorsk.

In the south, occupying forces are shelling along the entire length of the contact line in Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts. There have been limited clashes south-west of Donetsk in the area of Vodiane–Solodke–Volodymyrivka–Yehorivka–Pavlivka–Novomykhaylivka. The aggressor continues to launch intensive rocket attacks on targets in various parts of Ukraine (including Zelenodolsk, Nikopol, Mykolaiv, Odesa and Vinnytsia). The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation reported that the Western and Southern Military Districts command had been inspected by the head of the ministry, Sergei Shoigu, who ordered 'intensification of operations on all operational directions'.

On 17 July, President Volodymyr Zelensky signed decrees removing the head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), Ivan Bakanov, from his post and removing Prosecutor General Iryna Venediktova from her duties. In the first case, the decision was based on an article of the Armed Forces Disciplinary Code stating responsibility for 'improper performance of duties that resulted in fatalities', while in the second case it was based on the Martial Law act. Announcing the changes, the President pointed to the revealed cases of cooperation of SBU and Prosecutor General's Office officers with the occupiers. There are currently 650 criminal proceedings for treason and collaboration with Russians ongoing, which involve employees of both institutions, 60 of whom remained in the occupied territories and engage in anti-Ukrainian activities.

According to Vladimir Rogov, head of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast's collaborationist administration, substantial reinforcements from Russian law enforcement agencies had arrived in the occupied territory of the Oblast to support the collaborationist structures operating there in preventing Ukrainian underground activity. Rogov noted that terrorism and sabotage by 'Zelensky fighters' had become a major problem for the region. On 18 July, a series of explosions once again took place in Nova Kakhovka in the occupied Kherson Oblast. A representative of the Ukrainian regional authorities announced that enemy ammunition depots were burning and exploding. Earlier, on 12 July, the occupying army's arsenal was blown up in the town (the detonation of ammunition lasted all night, and 150 Russians were to be killed by rocket fire), and on 13 July there was another attack – on arms depots.

In Melitopol in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, the collaborationist authorities have decided to move their headquarters to a fortified building for security reasons. According to reports by local journalists, the occupiers are afraid to go out to work for fear of attacks by Ukrainian 'partisans'. On 17 July, strong explosions were reported in the city and collaborative structures of the Interior Ministry are investigating the preparation of a 'terrorist act'. A temporary 'capital' of the occupied territory (the invaders control about 60% of the Zaporizhzhia oblast) has been set up in Melitopol. Preparations are underway for a pseudo-referendum on the oblast's annexation to Russia.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Ukraine is settling its obligations on schedule. The institution expects this to continue in the future, which means rejecting the possibility of Kyiv's debt restructuring. The IMF has said that in the short term, the priority of support for Ukraine from the international community should be grant aid. Earlier, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said that the government was not considering debt restructuring, but expressed the hope that lenders would take such an initiative.

Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration Iryna Vereshchuk predicts the possibility of another wave of refugees once the heating season begins (usually this would be in mid-October), particularly from parts of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, including Enerhodar, which has been cut off from gas supplies. According to Vereshchuk, 4.5 million people have registered as internal refugees, while the real number of such refugees is close to 7 million. Germany plans to set aside an additional €2.4 billion by the end of the year to fund the upkeep of refugees from Ukraine, of whom there are 800,000 in Germany (30% of whom are under 14 years old).

Commentary

- The aggressor's troops concentrated primarily on trying to surround Sloviansk, but due to the determination of the Ukrainian army and their preparation of their positions, as well as the use of Western artillery systems, the defenders succeeded in successfully holding off the attacks. The failures on the frontline are explained by Russian propaganda as support from the West, which is supposed to be fighting a so-called proxy war with Russia. In propaganda terms, this thesis is used to justify the strikes on Ukrainian cities: in Kharkiv, the Hartron-Express research and industrial complex – allegedly a dislocation point for Western mercenaries – was shelled; in Dnipro, the Pivdenmash plant, allegedly used as a training site for the Ukrainian army by Western instructors; and in Vinnytsia, the

command post of the armed forces, where a meeting with foreign arms suppliers was to be held.

- Shoigu's call for an intensification of hostilities does not signify the formal end of the 'operational pause' (declared for some of the troops involved in the capture of Lysychansk) and the transition to the next stage of the task, that of taking control of the entire Donetsk Oblast. Despite the 'pause', fighting in the region has continued on a regular and permanent basis in recent weeks. The minister's visit was mainly of a disciplinary nature, with the aim of mobilising the commanders in charge of the Donetsk direction to take effective measures to reduce the scale of Ukrainian artillery strikes on weapons depots and command posts. The Kremlin's growing impatience stems from the fact that since the seizure of Lysychansk in early July, the invaders have failed to make significant military progress on any section of the front.
- Bakanov – a childhood friend of Zelensky's with no experience in the special services – became head of the SBU in 2019. He was supposed to be a trusted man of the president and, as an outsider, to foster further reform of the service. However, during his three years at the head of the SBU, he failed to gain authority in this structure and did not purge it of employees collaborating with the Russians. The immediate cause of Bakanov's and Venediktova's resignation was a series of scandals related to the revelation of SBU and Prosecutor General's Office officials' collaboration with the occupying forces (including the detention of the former head of the SBU board in Crimea on suspicion of treason and the former head of the SBU board in the Kherson Oblast). The head of the President's Office, Andriy Yermak, who is regarded as the second most influential man in the country and who in recent years has effectively eliminated many of Zelensky's trusted associates from his close circle or marginalised them, is considered to be the initiator of these reshuffles. The current changes in the Prosecutor General's Office and the SBU suggest that their new leadership will be loyal to Yermak and increase the influence of the presidential office on the security institutions.
- The arrival of a new wave of refugees – both internal and those going abroad – seems very likely in the autumn. The main factor forcing people to leave will probably be heating problems in parts of Ukrainian regions. This applies not only to the Zaporizhzhia Oblast – what remains uncertain is whether heating plants damaged by warfare, e.g. in Chernihiv and Kremenchuk, will be repaired. Russian troops are likely to continue destroying heating infrastructure in other cities. Emigration will also be encouraged by the deteriorating economic situation and difficulties in finding work.