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Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 158

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The Russians intensified their shelling and bombardment of Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Nikopol and towns near them and south of the Kryvyi Rih (mainly around Zelenodolsk). The assault on Mykolaiv on the night of 31 July was assessed by the defenders as one of the heaviest since the war began. Nikopol, which has been under constant shelling for several days, is awaiting its status as a town in the combat zone (with associated financial support for evacuated institutions and residents). Permanent targets of the aggressor's artillery and aviation remain the positions and hinterland of Ukrainian forces along the line of troop contact, as well as the border areas of the Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. Bakhmut, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk in the Donetsk Oblast, and Huliaipole and Orikhiv in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, have been particularly affected by shelling (including rocket fire). The authorities in Kyiv called on the entire population of Donbas to evacuate, and the local administration appealed to the residents of Zaporizhzhia Oblast towns located in the areas of hostilities to do the same. The invaders also continued rocket strikes against targets in the Odesa and Kirovohrad oblasts.

The Ukrainian Operational Command 'South' reported further attacks from HIMARS launchers, the targets of which were again the Antonivka Railway Bridge on the Dnieper (which was to be taken out of service) and a Russian train with soldiers and military equipment in the Kherson Oblast. The Ukrainian air force, in turn, was to bomb the aggressor's positions in the Bilohirka area at the junction of the Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts. As a result of the shelling of the hinterland of Russian forces in the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Oblast, there was to be a withdrawal of their units from the two existing positions (Verkhnii Tokmak and Chernihivka).

The invaders continue their assault on Bakhmut, advancing to its eastern foreground near Pokrovsk. The defenders repelled attacks in the Vershyna–Zaitseve and Yakovlivka–Soledar areas, south and north-east of the town respectively. A Russian reconnaissance group was also to be repulsed north of Siversk. South of Bakhmut, after partially capturing the village of Semyhirja, the Russian westward advance is halted in the Dolomitne–Travneve area. Fighting continues north and north-west of Donetsk – near Avdiivka, where the invaders were expected to achieve partial success, and the village of Pisky. The advance north from Avdiivka towards Kramatorsk was halted in the Novoselivka Druha–Krasnohorivka area. Attempts to break through Ukrainian defences south-west of Donetsk were also to fail.

The Russians resumed operations in the Balakliia area of the Kharkiv Oblast, where the defenders were to repel enemy reconnaissance subunits twice. Further attacks on Ukrainian positions north of the town of Barvinkove (in the area of Brazhkivka and Dmytrivka, on both

sides of the road from Izyum) and north-west of Sloviansk were to fail.

The Ukrainian side and external observers report the movement of more Russian units into the border region of Belgorod and into occupied Crimea, as well as additional troops into the Kherson (towards the direction of the Kryvyi Rih) and Zaporizhzhia oblasts (some of the forces previously operating towards Sloviansk were to be located there). The invaders have erected at least one pontoon bridge on the Dnieper River in the Kherson Oblast and launched a ferry crossing. They are also to reinforce the protection of damaged and new crossings (including using electronic warfare means) and move additional engineering equipment into the region.

Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov announced that Italy had approved a fourth package of military aid for Ukraine. Its details were not disclosed. Norway has donated 14 Iveco LAV III armoured cars and former President Petro Poroshenko's foundation has donated a set of H10 Poseidon Mk II reconnaissance drones. The first eight Krab self-propelled howitzers from the contract concluded by Poland and Ukraine in early June are awaiting delivery. Lithuania's defence ministry has announced its intention to hand over a further 10 M113 crawler transporters, and Germany's 16 Biber tank bridges (based on Leopard 1 tanks). The North Macedonian government has decided to send Kyiv a battalion set of tanks (Soviet T-72s or their Yugoslav version). According to Ukraine's ambassador in London, Vadym Prystaiko, the UK is about to deliver two minehunters to the country, most likely Sandown class, which local sailors are learning to operate.

President Volodymyr Zelensky called on the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross to clarify the circumstances of the tragic events in Olenivka, where on 29 July an explosion in a building with detained Ukrainian prisoners of war killed at least 50 people. It stated unequivocally that this was a deliberate, Russian-organised massacre of prisoners of war and that ‚there should be legal recognition of Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism'. The Ukrainian General Staff denied the opponent's accusations that the Ukrainian army, which allegedly fired on the building, was responsible for the tragedy. Ukrainian military intelligence and the SBU accused a Russian military formation, the so-called Wagnerites, of the deaths of the captives.

The occupation forces invariably encountered resistance from the local population and were forced to create administrative structures based on officials imported from Russia. Temporary boards of the Russian Interior Ministry have been set up in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts to deal with manifestations of ‚extremism' and to organise the issuing of Russian passports, as well as to supervise the work of collaborationist security structures. In Kherson, where Ukrainian sabotage groups are reported to be active, the self-proclaimed authorities have taken preventive steps to make it more difficult to resist the occupying forces. It was announced that a reward of: 10 thousand roubles for combat weapons, 6–8 thousand roubles for hunting weapons, 2 thousand roubles for artillery shells and mines, and 500 roubles for pointing out the location of ammunition. Those who hand over weapons will not be subject to criminal liability. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, outposts of the United Russia party have been activated in the occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, which are creating so-called voter lists and preparing 20 polling stations to hold an annexation referendum in September.

Under the aegis of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (FIS), a 'historical policy' is being shaped to justify Russia's rights to Ukrainian territory. The head of the service, Sergei Naryshkin, who also heads the Russian Historical Society, said that research should be undertaken on Russian-related objects in the Donbas and other occupied areas of the country and that they should be included in the State Register of Cultural Heritage Objects of the Russian Nations.

Head of the Police Headquarters, Ihor Klymenko, stated that 320 criminal proceedings had been opened for misappropriation of humanitarian aid, while 43 people had been indicted in cases of theft of material support intended for the armed forces and forced displaced persons. In Lviv Oblast, police detained people who attempted to trade in military ammunition, and in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, a group trafficking in humanitarian aid worth 1.3 million hryvnias (over $35,000). In the Rivne Oblast, criminals sold cars that had been purchased in support of Ukrainian forces, and in Ternopil one charity misappropriated almost 2 million hryvnias (over $50,000) donated by citizens in public collections.

On 1 August, the first ship with Ukrainian agricultural products sailed from the port of Odesa, made possible by an agreement signed on 22 July to unblock sea transport from three Ukrainian ports. The Sierra Leone-flagged bulk carrier 'Razoni' with a cargo of 26,000 tonnes of maize is moving along a corridor whose security is guaranteed by the parties to the agreement – the UN and Turkey – and is heading for the Lebanese port of Tripoli. There are 16 more ships ready for transport in Odesa. Infrastructure Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov said that Ukraine plans to reach full capacity in the coming weeks, with agricultural exports expected to provide the local economy with $1 billion in income per month.

On 1 August, the EU embargo on coal imports from Russia came into force under the fifth package of sanctions adopted on 7 April. The restrictions include a ban on the purchase, import and transport of coal and other fossil fuels originating in or exported from Russia. Previously, the EU imported €8 billion worth of coal from there every year.

On 28 July, the EU decided to increase electricity imports from Ukraine by two and a half times. European power system operators ENTSO-E agreed to increase Ukrainian exports from 100 to 250 MW per day. Ukrainian energy is currently purchased by Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Moldova. Hungary, on the other hand, stopped importing it after the invasion began. State-owned company Ukrenerho estimates that the increase in energy imports from Ukraine will allow the EU to further reduce its consumption of Russian gas and, in the future, to replace up to 5 bcm of it annually.

Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said that on 1 August the first tranche of €1 billion worth of EU financial assistance had been received. The second is expected the following day. These are part of a larger macro-financial support to counter the effects of the war worth a total of €9 billion. In turn, the National Bank of Ukraine announced that in 2022 the country's GDP will shrink by a third and inflation will exceed 30%. At the same time, its analysts predict a growth trend of 5–6% per annum in 2023–2024 – thanks to the revival of consumer demand, the resumption of technological and logistical processes and the activation of investment activity, especially with the prospect of Ukraine's European integration.

Commentary

- Since the withdrawal of forces from northern Ukraine and parts of the Kharkiv and Mykolaiv oblasts, Russia has not organised major troop movements in the theatre of operations or brought new units to the oblasts bordering the invaded country. The situation remained relatively stable from mid-May. According to Pentagon data, 110 battalion tactical groups were involved in the operation. The currently observed intensification of the aggressor's movement should be associated, on the one hand, with an increase in the Ukrainian army's capabilities in terms of precision strikes against the enemy's hinterland (Ukraine has at its disposal 12 launchers of the HIMARS system, for which it has received GPS-guided rockets; it is about to receive another four launchers), and, on the other hand, with the increasing likelihood of Kyiv taking steps of an offensive nature, enforced by its information policy to date.
- A far greater threat to the Russian operation than a potential counter-offensive is posed by the aforementioned growing Ukrainian artillery capabilities. Therefore, it should be assumed that the aggressor will resume offensive operations first and try to push the defenders' positions as far away as possible from the areas where the pseudo-referenda on the future of the occupied territories planned by Moscow for September are to be held. Alternatively, the invading forces will try to force the enemy (with its newly acquired capabilities) to shift the main burden of engagement to other regions. In this context, an aggressor strike on Kharkiv and/or Zaporizhzhia and the city of Dnipro (conducted simultaneously on both sides of the Dnieper River) should be considered most likely.
- Russia attaches great importance to creating a quasi-historical basis for the annexation of occupied territories. Russian foreign intelligence has assumed patronage of an operation designed to consolidate the view that Russia holds a 'civilisational' and imperial role in the Ukrainian territories, and has actively engaged in a plan to falsify historical events. The aim of these activities is to ultimately 'de-Ukrainianise' the occupied areas and erase the memory of the Ukrainians' aspiration for independence. The personal participation of the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service in the campaign indicates that the creation of 'historical policy' has become the domain of the special services, and its implementation is treated as an operation of strategic importance.