

Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 161

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski, Jadwiga Rogoża

Russian forces have intensified attacks north and west of Donetsk. Fighting is ongoing on the outskirts of Avdiivka – the invaders are attempting to break through Ukrainian defences towards Kramatorsk. Clashes are also being conducted for control of the village of Pisky (at the exit of the M04 highway from Donetsk to the Dnipro) and on the outskirts of Marinka. The aggressor continues to advance on Bakhmut and villages north and south-east of the city. The main areas of fighting are Soledar and Vershyna, as well as Kodema and Travneve north of Horlivka. Defenders have halted attacks to the north and north-east of Kharkiv. Clashes are ongoing south of Balakliia, while the intensity of attacks has decreased on the border of Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts (in recent days, the Ukrainians repulsed an attack on the Yaremivka-Dolyna section), where the Russians have shifted to diversionary and reconnaissance operations. The invaders were to attack enemy positions in the north-west part of the Kherson Oblast, near the border with the Mykolaiv and Dnepropetrovsk oblasts, without success.

The aggressor's artillery and aviation continue to shell and bombard positions and facilities of Ukrainian forces along the entire line of contact, as well as in the border areas of the Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. Kharkiv, Chuhuiv, Mykolaiv, Nikopol and towns south of the Kryvyi Rih are being systematically destroyed (also by rockets). In addition, rockets fell on the southern and eastern outskirts of Zaporizhzhia, Synelnykove in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast and a military unit in the Chervonohrad Raion (former Krystynopol) of Lviv Oblast. In the last of the attacks, the defenders were to shoot down seven of eight enemy cruise missiles. Ukrainian artillery fire was mainly focused on enemy positions in the Donbas (especially in and around Donetsk). The defenders hit the Antonivka Railway Bridge again. The Russians carried out makeshift repairs to the Antonivka Road Bridge, allowing vehicle traffic, but continue to bring new forces into the right-bank part of the Kherson Oblast also using temporary crossings

On 1 August, Washington announced a seventeenth \$550 million package of military aid to Ukraine, to include 75,000 155mm artillery munitions and GMLRS guided missiles for HIMARS and MLRS launchers. On the same day, Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov announced that four previously announced HIMARS launchers had arrived in the invaded country. The first four FlyEye unmanned aerial vehicles together with a control station, purchased as part of the 'Army of Drones' project based on a public collection (thanks to which the Ukrainian army will receive 20 Polish FlyEye drones with two control stations, as well as 20 units and two Warmate circulating munitions control stations), had also arrived.

On 2 August, the Russian Supreme Court, at the request of the Prosecutor General's Office, recognised the Ukrainian Azov regiment as a paramilitary terrorist organisation. The decision deprives the unit's soldiers of their rights as prisoners of war and is expected to facilitate their prosecution as terrorists responsible for crimes against civilians. Commenting on the ruling, President Volodymyr Zelensky said that it is intended to divert attention from the fact that Russia is a terrorist state, and called on the US authorities to confirm this fact. The Ukrainian side stresses that the Azov regiment is a regular unit that is part of the 12th National Guard brigade and that the veteran rights of the soldiers who are part of it cannot be undermined.

Ukraine's new Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin has announced the preliminary findings of the investigation into the deaths of 53 Ukrainian prisoners held in Olenivka. A rocket attack was unequivocally ruled out as the cause of the tragedy. According to Kostin, there are many indications that the deaths of the captives were caused by the deliberate use of a thermobaric charge. The priority task for Kyiv is to undermine the Russian propaganda message accusing Ukrainian forces of killing them as a result of a strike from the HIMARS system. The invaders have still not allowed representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross to inspect the site, contrary to their promises.

The occupied territories are experiencing delays in implementing tasks to speed up integration with Russia. The issuing of Russian passports has been slow – so far around 10,000 people have received them, which, according to Kyiv, represents 1% of the population living in the territories. In order to increase the rate of introduction of the rouble, the occupation authorities are trying to force residents to pay for utilities and municipal services in Russian currency. These actions are boycotted – the hryvnia still remains in circulation, especially in private sector settlements. The aggressor army, supported by the FSB and the National Guard, has intensified its filtration activities in the occupied Kherson Oblast. In the view of the Ukrainian authorities, this demonstrates the securing of the rear of its forces preparing for fighting in the south of the country, including through the deportation of those suspected of involvement in Ukrainian sabotage groups. The collaborationist authorities in Kherson have acknowledged that the legal status of the Russian-occupied territories is determined by the mere presence of Russian troops. This allows the organisation of local authorities without specifying nationality and the application of Russian law by the military administration. It was also reported that the date of the so-called referendum has not yet been decided.

A typing campaign is underway in towns and cities in the southern part of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast to identify people who may take part in 'spontaneous' demonstrations in support of the incorporation of the occupied territories into Russia. A group of Russian propagandists has arrived in Melitopol to create a positive image of the situation in the city for the media. There is a recruitment centre in Berdiansk recruiting for cooperation with the occupation authorities. Despite serious material incentives, there are few takers. Poor results in recruiting the population have forced the Russians to bring in 'activists' from Crimea, who are presented as residents of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. Since the beginning of the occupation, receiving financial or food aid has been made conditional on declaring support for the annexation referendum and accepting a Russian passport. A façade social movement 'Together with Russia' has begun its activities, with the task of organising paid

demonstrations of support.

According to Ukrainian border guards, since the beginning of the aggression, some 6,400 men evading mobilisation have been detained for attempting to leave the country illegally. More than 4,000 wanted to cross the so-called 'green border', the others were using false documents allowing them to leave. The State Investigative Service detained the head of a supplementary command and a law enforcement officer from Kramatorsk, who demanded a \$2,000 bribe for issuing a certificate of incapacity for military service. The head of the National Security and Defence Council, Oleksiy Danilov, criticised those evading the mobilization obligation. His statement was a response to yet another public petition to lift the ban on the departure from Ukraine of men of conscript age who do not have military experience or have limited capacity for service (the petition received more than 25,000 votes – the number necessary for its consideration by the president). Its authors argue that after 24 February, more than 110,000 men returned to Ukraine from abroad, more than 100,000 volunteers enrolled in the Territorial Defence and 20,000 in the International Legion, which, together with the Armed Forces and the Interior Ministry, makes 625,000 people trained for combat.

The mandatory evacuation of civilians from the Donetsk Oblast began on 2 August, which Kyiv plans to complete before the start of the heating season; the authorities made it clear that in the winter season, it will be impossible to provide heating in the region. Those refusing to leave their places of residence are to be required to sign a statement that they are fully aware of the consequences of staying. On the same day, the first evacuation train started from Pokrovsk. According to the head of the Donetsk Oblast Military Administration Pavlo Kyrilenko, two-thirds of the oblast residents left their homes after the Russian invasion began, but some 350,000 people still remain.

The Minister of Education and Science, Serhiy Shkarlet, informed that 30,000 school-age children who had fled abroad after 24 February, returned to Ukraine. The ministry estimates that 641,000 children are currently still outside the country (there were around 4.2 million pupils in Ukrainian schools when the aggression began). The minister assured that, despite the large scale of displacement, an adequate number of educational facilities will be provided in the new school year or remote teaching will be possible. Residential classes will only be allowed in schools with bomb shelters. Where shelters will not be able to accommodate all students and teachers, children will be educated in two shifts. In Kyiv, almost 70% of schools have shelters.

Commentary

- The intensification of Russian operations to the north and west of Donetsk, as well as Kyiv's decision to forcibly evacuate the population from the part of Donbas under the control of the defenders, confirm that the region has turned into a major area of armed clash, having the character of a total war on both sides, in which the Ukrainian side has also decided to use scorched earth tactics. Seizing the north-western part of the Donetsk Oblast, or at least moving Ukrainian troops away from Donetsk (since 2014, the defenders' positions have been running just outside the city's borders), making it impossible or at least difficult to shell it, was not a priority in the plan of operations after 24 February. It must be assumed that Russia consciously left Donetsk in the immediate

vicinity of the front line in order to use the later shelling of the city (and nearby Horlivka) by the opponent in the information war as a kind of counterweight, which it sought to offset internationally Kyiv's reports of the destruction of cities by aggressor forces.

- The current redeployment of invading troops – mainly to the occupied parts of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv oblasts – does not mean that, from the aggressor's point of view, the fighting for the Donbas will change in character. The main burden of the ongoing fighting in the region continues to fall on the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk people's militias, supported by Russian artillery and aviation. From Kyiv's perspective, the decision to forcibly evacuate the population may represent preparation for an eventual total withdrawal from the region. If this is the case, it should be seen as part of the prevention of further population loss, especially when the aggressor is exporting the population of the occupied areas to Russia.
- The readiness signalled by the Ukrainian side to take offensive action in the south has a negative impact on the effectiveness of the occupying force in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. The increased activity of its Russian troops indicates that the Russians are reckoning with the intensity of the fighting in the region. Ukrainian military activity, including shelling of bridge crossings, makes the occupied territories an immediate frontline area. Continued clashes slow down Russification and may have the effect of delaying the incorporation of these areas into Russia. Announcements of Kyiv taking the offensive have a significant impact on the growth of anti-Russian attitudes among the local population.
- Russia's recognition of the Azov regiment as a terrorist organisation is an example of legal nihilism placing a regular military unit outside the law. This fact will make it significantly more difficult to negotiate the release or exchange of detained soldiers. The court's verdict can be seen as an act of revenge against the people who offered prolonged resistance to the aggressor forces, portrayed by Russian propaganda as a product of 'Ukrainian Nazism'. Depriving them of their rights as prisoners of war opens the possibility of organising a show trial of the 'terrorists' who allegedly 'murdered civilians'. This is to divert attention from the crimes committed by the invading army against Ukrainian civilians.
- Open signs of discontent and opposition started to appear among Ukrainians as to the general mobilisation and the ban on men of conscription age going abroad. Law enforcement agencies constantly detect cases of evasion and illegal trafficking of men across the national border. At the same time, a third petition in a row has been submitted to the President by the activists demanding the liberalisation of restrictions on the departure of men abroad. Although the scale of evasion of military service and illegal departure from the country is limited, the increasing protests and discontent show that war fatigue and fear of direct participation in combat are beginning to increase and that their open expression is no longer taboo.