

Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 179

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In the Donetsk Oblast, fighting is ongoing in six directions, with the most serious operations in the area of Bakhmut, west of Horlivka and north-west of Donetsk. Defenders are holding positions east of the roads connecting Bakhmut with Siversk and Horlivka, as well as in localities north-east and south-east of the city. The direct assault on Bakhmut from the east underpinned the decision to evacuate the remnants of the population from the town. Russian forces strike north of Horlivka and also west of it, with Nyu-York, their main target there, being attacked from two directions. The defenders are repelling the assault on Avdiivka from the north, its southern outskirts and Krasnohorivka, which lies to the north of it. In turn, north-west of Donetsk, the Ukrainians are holding off attacks on the Pervomais'ke–Nevel's'ke line. Assaults on Marinka and the north-eastern outskirts of Vuhledar were to fail for the invaders.

Russian forces intensified operations towards Mykolaiv, attacking defender positions to the south (Tavriiske in the Kherson Oblast) and west (Blahodatne in the Mykolaiv Oblast) of the town. After two days of fighting, the Russians were to achieve partial success and take up positions in the town of Blahodatne. Before that, they were to reinforce their grouping on the right bank of the Dnieper with forces of up to two battalion tactical groups. The Ukrainian Operational Command 'South' further reported fighting on the border of the Kherson and Dnepropetrovsk oblasts. Invader activity also increased in Kharkiv Oblast, where an additional battalion tactical group was introduced and more electronic warfare systems were deployed. Russian forces attacked defender positions 20km north of the centre of Kharkiv (Pytomnyk, Borshchova), in the direction of Velyka Komyshevukha, west of the Izyum–Barvinkove road and north-east of the town of Barvinkove. They also stormed Ukrainian positions at the junction of Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts on the Sloviansk direction.

Russian artillery and aviation continued to strike Ukrainian army positions and facilities along the entire line of contact. Outside the immediate combat areas, the main targets of shelling and bombardment remained Kharkov, Mykolaiv and the Bashtanka Raion of the Mykolaiv oblast, the Kryvyi Rih, Nikopol (including the city of Nikopol) and Synelnykov Raions of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, towns south and south-east of Zaporizhzhia, Kramatorsk and the border regions of the Sumy and, to a lesser extent, Chernihiv oblasts. In addition, the targets of missile attacks were the area around the city of Dnieper (the defenders reported that they shot down four enemy 'Kalibr' missiles with just four of their own missiles from S-300 systems) and twice around Odessa. On 21 August, the Ukrainian Operational Command 'South' reported that the number of 'Kalibr' missile carriers operating

in the Black Sea area had increased from two to five.

The Ukrainian artillery and air force mainly attacked Russian positions and facilities in the Kherson Oblast, where Nova Kakhovka remained the main target (according to unclear reports, the target of the attack was again the bridge over the dam on the Dnieper), and ammunition depots at the airports of Chornobaivka (on the outskirts of Kherson) and Melitopol (Ukrainian saboteurs were said to be operating in this city) were also to be attacked. Defender forces were to destroy a Russian ammunition depot in Donetsk and a repair base near Alchevs'k in the Luhansk Oblast.

Ukrainian forces have continued their sabotage operations in occupied Crimea, which have particularly intensified over the past two days. A total of eight incidents were said to have occurred in Kerch, Sevastopol (including near the Black Sea Fleet headquarters) and the nearby Bel'bek airport, in Yevpatoriya and Bakhchysarai, possibly in the vicinity of these locations. No damage was confirmed to the Russian occupation forces as a result of the ongoing operations. Most likely, all drones used by the Ukrainian side were shot down. Ukrainian diversion is further attributed to a fire at an ammunition depot in the town of Stary Oskol in the Belgorod Oblast, which occurred on 18 August.

Washington has announced a new \$775m military support package for Ukraine, which includes more GMLRS missiles for HIMARS launchers, 16 105mm towed howitzers and 36,000 rounds of ammunition for them, 15 Sky Eagle reconnaissance BSPs for the navy, additional HARM (High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missiles), 1,000. missiles for Javelin launchers, 1,500 missiles for TOW launchers, 2,000 missiles for other anti-tank guided missile launchers (including the Swedish Carl Gustaf), 50 Humvee all-terrain vehicles and 40 MaxxPro Mine-Resistant Enhanced Protection (MRAP) trucks. Germany supplied Ukraine with three Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft gun, 11 M113 tracked transporters and 1,000 food rations. According to the newspaper Welt am Sonntag, they are also to donate 255 155mm Vulcano guided artillery shells (with a range of 70–80km) for PzH 2000 self-propelled gun-howitzers. The Estonian government has decided to donate mortars and unspecified anti-tank equipment, and has also decided to join a UK-implemented programme to train Ukrainian soldiers. The Ukrainian government's platform for raising support funds for Ukraine United24 donated a Mi-2 AM1 helicopter to the army, and Serhiy Prytula's support fund purchased a SAR microsatellite from Finnish company ICEYE worth more than 600 million hryvnias (\$16 million) for the army.

Advisor to the head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Mykhailo Podolak categorically rejected accusations against Kiev of preparing the attack that killed the daughter of Russian Eurasianism ideologue Daria Dugin. He stressed that unlike Russia, Ukraine is not a criminal state, let alone a terrorist state. In his view, Dugin's death is the result of political poverties within the Russian elite.

The Kyiv City Military Administration has banned all mass events in the capital from 22 to 25 August, due to the high probability of Russian missile attacks on the city in connection with the 31st anniversary of independence (24 August) and National Flag Day (23 August). Employees of government institutions were advised to work remotely. President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed his concern that Russia would seek to inflict particularly severe losses on Ukraine this week, while at the same time trying to humiliate Ukrainians, sow fear among them and fuel conflicts.

Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR) says Russia cannot create new military units due to a lack of volunteers for service. In Nizhny Novgorod, the replenishment of a tank battalion, which has been ongoing since the beginning of July, cannot be completed – only 30 soldiers were to sign a new contract, while the plan was to recruit 160. HUR also reported that Belarus is supporting the Russian air force by taking part in the repair and overhaul of aircraft and helicopters. The defence ministries of Belarus and Russia recently signed an agreement under which employees of the 558th Aircraft Repair Plant in Baranavichi are posted to work at the repair base in Kubinka, near Moscow. Belarusian specialists are also to take part in the preparation for use of equipment hitherto held in reserve by the Russian Air Force.

Subsequent personnel decisions by the occupation authorities in southern Ukraine demonstrate the difficulty of recruiting collaborators and the need to channel personnel from deep inside Russia. The first deputy head of the occupation administration for security in Kherson was Alexei Katerinichev, former deputy head of the Emergency Operations Centre of the Ministry for Emergency Situations of the Russian Federation. Semen Maushkanec, an official of the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade, was also put to work in Kherson, while Yevgeny Nemtinov, former head of the accounting and reporting department of the Ministry of Finance of occupied Crimea, is to be in charge of financial policy. In the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Alexei Lysov, who previously worked in Vologda, became the so-called ‘deputy prime minister for infrastructure development’, while the new ‘deputy minister for labour and social policy’ Yevgeny Markelov was seconded from the authorities in Krasnodar. In turn, the mayor of that city, Andrei Alexeyenko, was appointed first deputy head of the so-called military-civil administration of the Kharkiv Oblast. According to Ukrainian intelligence, Russia plans to annex around 30% of the territory of the region.

The Kremlin has still not decided whether to announce annexation referendums, although one is still under consideration for 11 September, the day of local elections in Russia. Due to the fiasco of capturing the Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts within administrative boundaries, a ‘default’ incorporation of these territories into Russia is being considered in the event of their subsequent seizure. On the other hand, in the event that the autumn referendums are abandoned, the option of holding these votes in winter is being considered.

The head of the UK’s intelligence services, Jeremy Fleming, has stated that Russian actions in the information space taken since the start of the aggression proved incompetent and disinformation operations were quickly exposed. In his view, a month before the attack on Ukraine, Russian military intelligence deployed WhisperGate malware to damage and paralyse Ukrainian government systems, and less than an hour before the invasion, Russia attacked Viasat satellite networks used by the military, government and civilians. Fleming added that British intelligence had taken steps to counter Russian online activity, and indicated that Ukraine was well prepared to fight in the digital space. He also announced, without giving details, that London was ready to engage a unit using offensive cyber tools against Russia.

On 18 August in Lviv, President Zelensky met with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. The issues discussed concerned, among other things, the prospects for talks with the Russian side and the improvement of Ukrainian grain exports. Erdoğan stressed the need to seek a diplomatic agreement and return to

negotiations, and indicated that he had proposed to Zelensky to organise a meeting with Putin in Turkey. After the talks, the Ukrainian president stated that negotiations with Russia were only possible if Russian troops left the occupied territories. In turn, Mykhailo Podolak assessed that negotiating with Putin is a dangerous game that will not lead to an end of the war. Turkey is to take part in the post-war reconstruction of Ukrainian infrastructure under a relevant memorandum signed by the two countries' infrastructure ministers. With the UN Secretary-General, Zelensky discussed, among other things, the parameters of a possible International Atomic Energy Agency mission to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which is located in Russian-occupied territory, and the prospects for the release of Ukrainian prisoners of war.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European Integration Olha Stefanishina stated that Ukraine wants to get a clear message from EU leaders by the end of the year on the next steps towards its EU membership. She stressed that the Ukrainian state had fulfilled 70 per cent of its obligations under the Association Agreement and therefore did not need to be assessed 'from scratch'. In order to start accession talks, the European Commission, as part of the procedure for assessing candidate countries, must adopt a positive report on Ukraine by the end of the year. Head of the EU Delegation in Kiev Matti Maasilta pointed out that Ukraine has so far fulfilled one of the recommendations of the European Commission by appointing the head of the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office.

On 19 August, President Zelensky signed a law introducing a moratorium on increases in heating charges for the population (a government draft was adopted by the Verkhovna Rada on 29 July). The document stipulates that the suspension will be in force during martial law and six months after its end. The law prohibits tariff increases for gas distribution, heating and hot water supply services. The Verkhovna Rada allocated 111.1 billion hryvnias (\$3 billion) from the state budget to Naftohaz to compensate for the resulting expenses.

Commentary

- The course of the Ukrainian diversionary action in Crimea indicates that the blowing up of an ammunition depot at Saki airfield on 9 August and the resulting damage had the effect of mobilising the occupation services responsible for the security of the aggressor forces' base. As a result, subsequent attacks did not have such spectacular effects (an ammunition depot located outside the military complexes was to be destroyed, and there was also a fire in a barracks facility next to the airfield), and those carried out in recent days probably did not have any tangible effect. It must be assumed that the anti-diversion measures taken by the Russians made it significantly more difficult for Ukrainian groups operating in Crimea to properly prepare their attacks and approach particularly important facilities (the effect of this was to attack probably only with drones). Despite the lack of military consequences, the diversionary action is a significant psychological success, as the very demonstration of Ukrainian activity in Crimea ridicules the occupying power's security structures and demonstrates that they are not in full control of the situation on the peninsula.
- The involvement of the Ukrainian special services in the organisation of the bombing that allegedly killed Alexander Dugin is unlikely. Organising or inspiring the assassination of the Russian propagandist would not bring tangible benefits to the Ukrainian side, but only

image damage allowing the Kremlin to accuse Kiev of state terrorism. Dugin is hardly recognised in Ukraine and his anti-Ukrainian activities are not a topic covered by the media. The FSB's official accusation of Ukrainian services of organising the attack means that the alleged 'Ukrainian trace' will be used to reinforce the negative image of Ukraine and become part of a disinformation operation aimed also at Western audiences.

- Erdoğan, who made his first visit to Ukraine since the invasion began, is seeking to secure his role as the main intermediary in potential peace negotiations between the Ukrainian and Russian presidents (the first round of talks between the Ukrainian and Russian delegations took place in Istanbul in March this year). This is due to Erdoğan's close cooperation with both Russia and Ukraine. Ankara's efforts, however, encounter Kiev's uncompromising stance, with Zelensky and his entourage rejecting the possibility of any talks with Moscow, even with intermediaries, until the de-occupation of Ukraine.