

Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 182

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As warned by the Ukrainian side, the number of Russian rocket attacks increased significantly on Ukraine's Independence Day, 24 August. The city of Dnipro and the Chaplyne railway station in the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast were hit – the attack there was the bloodiest of those carried out that day: at least 25 people were killed and 31 wounded. Subsequent targets were Kharkiv (the strikes on the city were also continued by enemy artillery and aviation), Zaporizhzhia and localities in the Khmelnytsky (enemy rockets were to destroy unspecified infrastructure facilities in the Shepetivka Raion), Poltava (the targets were facilities of the 831st Tactical Aviation Brigade in Mirhorod), Rivne and Zhytomyr oblasts. Along with artillery shelling and aerial bombardments on Independence Day, the Russians were to attack a total of 58 localities, including 20 in the Donetsk Oblast. The defenders were to shoot down two rockets in the Cherkasy and Vinnytsia oblasts. In addition, on 25 August, rockets struck the Vyshhorod Raion in the Kyiv Oblast.

Russian artillery and aviation continued to shell and bombard the positions and facilities of Ukrainian forces along the entire line of contact and in the border areas of the Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. In addition to the aforementioned Kharkiv, their main targets outside the immediate combat areas were Mykolaiv (including port infrastructure) and the Bashtanka Raion of the Mykolaiv Oblast, the southern part of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, including Kryvyi Rih, Marhanets and Nikopol, towns south and south-east of Zaporizhzhia, and, in the Donetsk Oblast, Sloviansk. On 23 August, both sides accused each other of shelling civilian areas of Donetsk.

Ukrainian shelling and bombardment of enemy positions was concentrated mainly in the Kherson Oblast. Once again, the Kakhovka (dam) and – twice – Antonivskyi (vehicle) bridges were attacked, as well as the ammunition depots at Chornobaivka, Kakhovka and Novovoskresens'ke. Outside the area in question, the defenders were to destroy the ammunition depot at Tokmak in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast. The Ukrainian Operational Command 'South' and representatives of the local administration also reported that defenders had hit targets in Enerhodar and Nova Kakhovka. On 23 August, another case of Ukrainian diversion was reported in Sevastopol, Crimea, but the drone was allegedly shot down by occupation forces.

The Ukrainian side has once again limited information coverage of the situation in the combat areas. In Donbas, defenders are still expected to repel Russian forces in the area of Bakhmut, north-east of Donetsk and between Marinka and the border with Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Before 24 August, fighting was also to take place over the towns of Zaitseve, Kurdyumivka, Krasnohorivka and Zolota Nyva. The invaders were to make single,

unsuccessful attempts to advance at the junction of Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts – in the direction of the towns of Barvinkove (Nova Dmytrivka) and Sloviansk (Dolyna), and at the junction of Kherson and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts (Mykolaivka).

On 24 August, US President Joe Biden announced the largest military support package to date for Ukraine, worth \$2.98 billion. According to the Pentagon, the deliveries are to be long-term (one to three years) and the package included six NASAMS air defence systems with ammunition, 245,000 155 mm calibre artillery shells, 65,000 120 mm mortar grenades, 24 artillery radars, Puma unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and additional equipment for Scan Eagle UAVs, VAMPIRE anti-drone missile systems, unspecified laser-guided missile systems and funding for training, maintenance and support. Turkey donated 50 Kirpi armoured vehicles to Ukraine and the Viktor Pinchuk Foundation donated 12 'Fury' UAVs. Slovakia, in turn, announced the donation of 30 post-Soviet infantry fighting vehicles and – after receiving 15 Leopard 2 tanks from Germany in return – 30 T-72 tanks. The UK and Norway announced their intention to purchase 850 Black Hornet miniature UAVs and the Nightfighter anti-drone defence system for the Ukrainian army. From September, 15 Lithuanian instructors are to join the UK-implemented training programme for Ukrainian soldiers.

According to the Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, Oleksiy Danilov, it is highly likely that the FSB is planning to carry out a series of terrorist attacks in the Russian Federation, with no regard for civilian casualties. The brutal actions, with the indication that the attacks are the work of Ukrainian services, are intended to cause shock among the population and stem the 'declining support' for continuing the war against Ukraine. In Danilov's view, the possibility of such a scenario is signalled by the assassination of the daughter of Alexander Dugin, one of the ideologues of Russian neo-imperialism. According to him, she was killed by the Russian special services, which are beginning to remove people who criticise the ineffective course of the so-called special operation or express disappointment with it.

In response to repeated acts of sabotage in occupied Crimea, the so-called local authorities have tightened the security regime. In Sevastopol, the creation of 'volunteer patrols' to support the Interior Ministry and the FSB has begun in order to identify the saboteurs and the means of transport they use in advance. At the same time, an attempt is being made to involve as many residents as possible in such activities. To this end, special accounts (so-called chatbots) will be launched on social networks, through which it will be possible to send photos and videos that may be of interest to law enforcement agencies. A 'yellow' (high) 'terrorist threat' level has been in force in Sevastopol since 31 July.

The activity of Ukrainian sabotage groups maintains an atmosphere of tension in the regions bordering Ukraine. On 22 August, the governor of the Belgorod Oblast, Vyacheslav Gladkov, again extended (until 7 September) the 'yellow' terrorist threat level, banning, among other things, the use of fireworks and firecrackers. Such a state has been in place in the Oblast since 11 April in response to a number of incidents involving the destruction of critical infrastructure facilities, including fuel depots.

On 23 August in Kherson, Igor Telegin, who was acting in the regional collaborationist authorities as head of the internal policy department, was killed in a bomb attack. A day later, Ivan Sushko, head of the so-called Zaporizhzhia military-civilian administration, was

killed. According to the Ukrainian government's Centre for National Resistance, the occupation administration has blocked social benefits for pensioners, and the condition for continuing to receive them is to accept a Russian passport. In this way, the Russians are creating the conditions for a humanitarian disaster, as the vast majority of Ukrainians are unwilling to voluntarily accept Russian citizenship.

The Ukrainian police recalled that the passportisation conducted in the occupied territories is illegal and Russian documents will not be recognised on Ukrainian territory. It also stressed that the acquisition of Russian citizenship by Ukrainian citizens under duress does not carry legal consequences and is not a reason to lose Ukrainian citizenship.

The National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) has warned that attempts to put into circulation hryvnias originating from temporarily occupied territories have been reported. The banknotes are damaged, stained or perforated and come from bank deposits seized by the Russians. The NBU appealed for caution and to inform the police about persons attempting to make payments with such banknotes. It recommended a preference for cashless payments, which are the safest under martial law.

The Russian side is trying to cover up its military failures by building up a false message that the lack of progress in the war is a planned action. On 24 August, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said that the slowing down of the offensive was a conscious decision based on a desire to minimise civilian casualties. He stressed that Russian forces strictly adhere to the norms of humanitarian law. Missile strikes are carried out with precision weapons only against military infrastructure. He accused Ukrainian military units of using scorched earth tactics and terrorist actions. In turn, the head of Ukrainian military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, said that Russia has significantly slowed the pace of its offensive against Ukraine due to the depletion of its reserves. Russian soldiers are said to be feeling moral and psychological fatigue due to the lack of progress on the frontline.

For security reasons, on Ukraine's Independence Day on 24 August, no anniversary celebrations were held in the cities with the participation of the population (they were advised to stay at home), but the authorities honoured the holiday in their speeches – at the celebrations it was emphasised that Ukraine was paying the highest price for its independence. In his speech, President Volodymyr Zelensky pointed out that over the past six months, the country has shown its valour, changed history and the world, awakened Europe and spurred it to consolidation and action. Zelensky declared the regaining of Crimea and stressed that Kyiv would never recognise its territorial losses.

On 23 August, the second summit of the Crimean Platform, an international conference devoted to the deoccupation of the peninsula, took place. It was attended remotely by nearly 60 heads of state, organisations and foreign ministers. President of Poland Andrzej Duda was the only one to arrive in Kyiv. Participants condemned Russian aggression, expressed solidarity with Ukraine and assured continued support for the Ukrainian army, budget and society. The Polish President pointed out that the world had accepted the annexation of Crimea too easily and it was only the brutality of the current invasion that forced many countries to review their attitudes, and called for the complete dismantling of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stressed that the international community would never recognise Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories and pointed to Moscow's responsibility for the world food crisis. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken

pledged to maintain the sanction pressure on Russia. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson indicated the need to continue military, humanitarian, economic and diplomatic support for Ukraine. EC head Ursula von der Leyen stressed that the international community will do everything to ensure that those guilty of human rights violations are punished. In a joint statement, the summit participants pledged to maintain pressure on Moscow to restore Ukraine's control over territory previously illegally seized by the Russians.

Head of the EU Delegation to Ukraine Matti Maasikas said that most likely in the second half of 2023 the European Commission will assess Ukraine's progress on the seven priority areas of reform identified by the EC, and this assessment will become the basis for the possible start of accession negotiations. He noted Kyiv's progress in the fight against corruption – the appointment of the head of the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, the members of the Higher Judicial Council, the initiation of the process of selecting the head of the NABU. At the same time, he stated that the adoption of European legislation would be a major challenge, as it involved not only the implementation of new laws, but also complex and costly European rules and standards. However, he assessed that Ukraine is in a better position than the countries joining the EU 25 years ago, as it has experience in implementing the Association Agreement.

According to a survey by the Rating agency, the attitude of Ukrainians towards Russians and Belarusians continues to deteriorate, with 81% now having a negative attitude towards Russians (14% neutral, 3% positive) and 52% (34% neutral, 10% positive) of those questioned towards Belarusians. Attitudes towards Russian-speaking Ukrainians are mostly positive (51%) or neutral (31%) – sociologists point out that this has improved as a result of the war, from 37% in April 2021 to 51% in August 2022. At the same time, a relative softening of public attitudes towards the prospect of an agreement with the Russians can be observed: while in April two-thirds of respondents stated that reconciliation was impossible, in August such respondents numbered around half, and one-third believed that a resumption of relations would be possible in 20–30 years.

Commentary

- The Pentagon's disclosure of the details of the financially largest aid package to the Ukrainian army since 2014, especially the emphasis on its long-term nature, should be considered disappointing from the perspective of the current phase of the war. New supplies will not arrive in Ukraine until a few months at the earliest, and the new package lacks the categories of offensive weaponry advocated by the Ukrainian side. Thus, the likelihood of Ukraine mounting a counter-offensive later this year is significantly reduced. Reports from Washington indicate that it considers the situation on the frontline to be relatively stable and the prospect of a military struggle to be long-term. It is clear from US declarations that the aim of the assistance is a long-term change in the Ukrainian Armed Forces resulting in a complete transition away from exhausted post-Soviet weaponry and, within the next few years, towards Western weaponry and standards. Preparations to start training Ukrainian pilots (funds for this have been included in the Pentagon's 2023 budget) should be seen in this context. Ultimately, it should be assumed that this means agreeing to provide Ukraine not only with larger tranches of armaments than at present, but also to expand them to include the aircraft and helicopters missing from the current packages, as well as tanks and armoured combat vehicles.

- The anti-Ukrainian propaganda campaign launched by the Russian special services accusing the Ukrainian authorities of organising the assassination of Alexander Dugin's daughter has been undermined by Kyiv's consistent information policy. While rejecting the Russian accusations, the focus has been on pointing out the falsifications made by the FSB when it tried to prove the existence of a Ukrainian trail in a hurry. This response by Kyiv will help to weaken the propaganda message of the Kremlin, which is using Dugina's assassination to damage the image of the Ukrainian president as a politician using political terror.
- Incidents evidencing continued sabotage operations by Ukrainian forces in annexed Crimea and the partially occupied Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts undermine the preventive capabilities of the Russian military and special services. They also negatively affect the functioning of the collaborationist authorities. Ukrainian actions greatly impede the preparation of annexation referendums and fuel the atmosphere of temporariness of the occupation, which is important for strengthening anti-Russian attitudes among the local population.
- The second Crimea Platform summit became a success for Kyiv, as it attracted key Western leaders (including the leaders of Germany, France, the UK, the EU and EC, the US Secretary of State), but also African, South American and Asian countries. Despite differences in emphasis, a consistent message of non-acceptance of Russian aggression and occupation of Ukrainian territories, Russia's responsibility for the ongoing war and assurances of support flowed to Kyiv. Thus, the 2021 initiated Crimean Platform gained a new dimension in the wake of Russia's aggression, as it consolidated most of the world's states around Ukraine. Both the conduct of the summit and Kyiv's wider diplomatic and communication activities demonstrate that, since the beginning of the invasion, the authorities have effectively used all available channels and platforms to publicise their cause, solicit solidarity and support and empower the Ukrainian state on the international stage.