

Russia's attack on Ukraine: day 186

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The fighting in the Donetsk Oblast did not bring significant changes. Russian forces approached Bakhmut from the south-east, attacking the defenders' positions in the village of Vesela Dolyna, neighbouring the city. The Ukrainians are still defending themselves in the villages northeast of Bakhmut (Soledar, Bakhmuts'ke), on its eastern outskirts and east of the Bakhmut– Horlivka road (Kodema). Defenders also hold positions north-west of Donetsk, however, the aggressor's advance has shifted north of the city, along the road to Kramatorsk (Oleksandropil). Fighting continues for towns along the road running south from Donetsk to the border with Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. Russian attacks on the direction of Slavyansk from Lyman and the border of Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts, as well as north-east of Siversk, were to fail. The invaders were also to attempt attacks on Ukrainian positions north of Kharkiv and on the border of Kherson and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts. The first subunits of the newly-formed operational formation of the Western Military District, the 3rd Army Corps, were to be moved from Russia's Nizhny Novgorod Oblast to the Rostov Oblast bordering the Donbas.

The Russians continued to shell and bombard the positions and rear of the Ukrainian forces along the entire line of contact and the border regions of the Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. With particular intensity, Kharkiv and Mykolaiv with their immediate environs, Zaporizhzhia (including the Motor Sich plant) and towns south-east of this city and the southern regions of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast were attacked. In addition, targets of missile strikes were the Bucha and Vyshhorod Raions of the Kyiv Oblast, the outskirts of the cities of Dnipro, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk and an unspecified military facility in the Sarny Raion of the Rivne Oblast.

Ukrainian artillery and helicopter gunships attacked mainly Russian positions in the Kherson Oblast, as well as their logistical and staff facilities in and around Kherson, Melitopol (Russian bases in this city are expected to be the most frequent target of missiles from HIMARS launchers) and Nova Kakhovka. Defenders were once again to hit the Antonivka and Kakhovka bridges, along which a pontoon crossing is under construction. On two occasions, Ukrainian rockets were to attack targets in the Luhansk Oblast (Kadyevka, Svatove). On 28 August, another attempt at Ukrainian diversion was reported in the Sevastopol area.

The US Department of Defense has entered into a contract with Raytheon Missiles & Defense for the purchase – for the Ukrainian army – of NASAMS short- and medium-range anti-aircraft missile sets with a completion date of August 2024. The \$182 million contract is part of a nearly \$3 billion US military support package announced in August. Spain

announced that another batch of equipment and war materiel has been sent to Ukraine. It included 20 armoured vehicles, 75 pallets of artillery ammunition and an anti-aircraft battery and 1,000 tonnes of fuel worth a total of €2.5 million. In addition, the Ukrainian army is to receive 30,000 uniforms from Spain. Lithuania will purchase 37 Warmate circulating ammunition made by WB Group for Ukraine.

On 26 August, the CEO of the Turkish company Bayrak Haluk Bayraktar stated that his company would not sell drones to Russia, regardless of the amount offered. He stressed that the decision on the recipient of the drones is determined by the company's management in consultation with the state authorities. He added that Ukraine has become the target of an aggressive and unjustified attack, and this excludes the possibility of cooperation with Russia.

Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov has proposed the introduction of new measures to increase Ukraine's mobilisation potential, calling them the 'intelligent militarisation' of society. All state and local government officials will have to undergo compulsory military training before taking up their posts. In turn, an analysis must be carried out for all those who may be mobilised to indicate the military's preferred professional specialities.

The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) is continuing a counter-intelligence operation to detect individuals who have undertaken agent work for Russia. The head of the Institute for the Training of SBU's Legal Personnel at Yaroslav Mudryi University was detained on 26 August. According to investigators, in late February/early March, the suspect allegedly persuaded his subordinates not to resist the armed forces of the aggressor and to go over to the side of the invaders.

The SBU has appealed to Hasidim to refrain from visiting Ukraine on the occasion of the Rosh Hashanah holiday falling this year on 26–27 September. The Ukrainian side will reinforce anti-terrorist protection of places of worship and the movement routes of worshippers, but fears that the mass celebrations could be used by Russia for provocation aimed at destabilising inter-ethnic relations and undermining Ukraine's image.

The occupation authorities report further examples of activity by Ukrainian sabotage groups. On 25 August, a building near Melitopol was blown up to house a voting station during the planned pseudo-referendum. A day later, in Berdiansk, the deputy head of the collaborationist traffic police was wounded by an explosive charge, and the next day the head of the collaborationist police of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast – a retired Ukrainian border police officer who had volunteered to cooperate after the Russians entered. In turn, Oleksiy Kovalyov, a former deputy of the Servant of the Nation faction who had switched to the Russian side, was killed near Kherson on 28 August.

According to Kyiv, the occupiers are aiming to hold a pseudo-referendum within five days of its announcement. Votes will be collected by volatile groups at the place of residence. In the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Oblast, the collaborators announced the formation of a 'referendum' electoral commission, but did not give a date for holding the vote. Meanwhile, according to information from the Ukrainian military intelligence service (HUR), only 5–7% of Mariupol residents are ready to take part in the referendum. Under the guise of determining gas and electricity consumers, a census of the population there is underway, but the occupation authorities still have not collected information on the number of people residing

in the city. Intelligence notes that the occupiers are not raising the issue of holding a referendum and are concentrating on propaganda campaigns to promote the provision of humanitarian aid to the population. Kyiv also points to the failure of the rapid 'passportisation' of the occupied territories – in Berdiansk (which had a population of over 100,000 before the war), only 800 people have received Russian passports since July.

The difficult military situation of the Russian forces is evidenced by the statement of the deputy head of the occupation administration in Kherson, Kirill Stremousov, who said that only a shift of the front towards Mykolaiv would guarantee the security of the occupied territories of the Kherson Oblast. At the same time, the deputy head of the Russian Presidential Administration, Sergey Kiriyenko, stated that the Russian President had instructed that on 1 September all educational institutions in the occupied territories would be placed under the protection of Russian troops.

According to Ukraine's military intelligence service (HUR), a mood of panic caused by repeated acts of sabotage persists in occupied Crimea. In an effort to contain the situation, Russian Deputy Defence Minister Dmitry Bulgakov has ordered that information about incidents involving the destruction of military infrastructure be censored and portrayed as the result of officials' negligence. According to HUR, thousands of Russians are urgently trying to leave the territory of occupied Crimea, fearing further Ukrainian actions.

On 29 August, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Grossi, announced that the Agency's mission is on its way to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Enerhodar. Representatives from 13 countries are taking part in the mission, including Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Serbia, China, Albania, France, Italy, Jordan, Mexico and North Macedonia. The power station has remained occupied by Russian troops since 4 March and has come under constant Russian shelling in recent weeks, which has raised fears of the risk of a major accident. On 25 August, the plant stopped producing electricity completely, albeit intermittently, for the first time in its history and was disconnected from the grid. On the eve of the IAEA mission's departure, on the night of 28–29 August, Russian troops again shelled the town of Enerhodar.

From 1 September, the 'Service Trip' project is to be launched in Ukraine, which will allow men of conscription age to leave the country for seven days after paying a bail of 200,000 hryvnias (about \$5,500). The application will be available on the state services app 'Dija', and the feature is currently running in test mode. At the first stage, individual entrepreneurs and self-employed persons will be able to use it, and the conditions will be the timely submission of tax returns, no arrears in social security contributions and an average salary of 20 thousand hryvnias (\$550) at the company whose representative plans to go abroad.

The head of Naftogaz, Yuriy Vitrenko, announced that the people of Ukraine are likely to face the most difficult winter in recent decades. He reported that this year's heating season will start later and end earlier than usual, while indoor temperatures will be around 17–18°C, i.e. about four degrees below normal. Vitrenko pointed out that without Western financial support it will not be possible to buy enough gas. According to him, Ukraine will need 4 billion m³ of gas, which will cost about \$10 billion. He also reported that the Ukrainian state is preparing emergency equipment, including mobile boiler houses, heating plants and diesel generators (for up to 200,000 people) in case of Russian attacks on the energy infrastructure.

Commentary

- Apart from the Donbas, where Russian forces are attempting to expand their holdings with little success, neither side has been taking more active measures for a long time. Periodic attacks by the aggressor are mainly aimed at probing defences, less often at improving the so-called tactical situation. A wait-and-see atmosphere prevails on both sides, especially in view of repeated announcements of a counter-offensive by part of the Ukrainian leadership (today's media reports of an alleged broad Ukrainian counter-offensive towards Kherson are not confirmed). In the coming weeks, however, a significant overstretch on the frontline is unlikely. The defenders are still not adequately equipped to attempt to seize the initiative, while reports of units being moved from deep inside Russia close to the Ukrainian border still point primarily to a rotation of fighting units rather than an increase in grouping. Compared to the defenders, the aggressor has a much greater capacity to intensify offensive operations, but is most likely aware that this would entail a significant increase in its own losses.
- The activity of sabotage groups operating in the partially occupied Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts, as well as ongoing Ukrainian artillery shelling, casts doubt on Russia's ability to smoothly conduct the so-called annexation referenda. The repeated successful assassinations of representatives of the collaborationist authorities significantly disorganise the work of the occupation administration. They also demonstrate the inability of the Russian FSB and National Guard to protect the self-appointed representatives of the authorities. This reinforces anti-Russian sentiment in the occupied territories and causes difficulties in recruiting more collaborators, including in recruiting FSB officers from deep inside Russia who fear for their lives.
- The decision to gradually loosen restrictions on the departure of men of conscription age abroad is prompted by an awareness of growing public opposition to the strict ban on their leaving the country. The president had already received three petitions on this issue, each signed by more than 25,000 citizens. Despite their rejection by Zelensky and his firm declarations on the universal duty to defend the state, the authorities – presumably fearing a further rise in discontent – are introducing minor exceptions to the existing rules, limited to certain professional categories and allowing only short trips secured by bail. This would, on the one hand, channel public discontent and, on the other, keep the process of drafting conscripts undisturbed.