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Frontline stabilisation. War after 202 days

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski, Krzysztof Nieczypor

Ukrainian forces continue to take control of the previously occupied part of the Kharkiv region – up to and including 13 September, they have seized an area of nearly 4,000 km² with 300 villages and 150,000 inhabitants. A further 4,000 km² of recaptured territory awaits so-called stabilisation operations. The Ukrainian side reports that the counter-offensive is underway with the aim of fully driving the enemy out of the entire Kharkiv Oblast. Units are probing a new Russian defence line on the Oskil River – according to unofficial reports they were due to cross it in the Borova area northeast of Izyum. The Ukrainian army has entered Sviatohirsk and is continuing to push back the enemy from the Donetsk Oblast. The army, however, failed to break through the Russian defences near Lyman.

Invading forces continue to attack defender positions in the Donbas. They have made slight progress with strikes towards Bakhmut from the south (along the road from Horlivka), but are being held back on another line of defence near Odradivka. The Ukrainians continue to repel attacks on Bakhmut from the east, as well as to the northeast and southeast of the town. Attacks on Avdiivka (there was a massive shelling of the city on the night of 14 September) and to the north and west of it, as well as in the Siversk and Horlivka areas, were also to fail. In contrast, a relative calming of the situation occurred southwest of Donetsk. Aggressor activity on the right bank of the Dnieper increased, but repeated attempts to advance in the Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts were repulsed by the defenders.

Russian artillery and aviation continued to shell and bombard the positions and facilities of Ukrainian forces along the entire line of contact, as well as in the border areas of the Chernihiv (sporadically) and Sumy oblasts (with greater intensity). The shelling of Mykolaiv (a massive attack on the town on the night of 14 September) and Nikopol was intensified. Kharkiv and Lozova in the Kharkiv Oblast, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk and Kostiantynivka in the Donetsk Oblast, Zaporizhzhia and towns southeast of it, the Bashtanka and Mykolaiv Raions in the Mykolaiv Oblast, and the Kryvyi Rih and Nikopol Raions in the Dnepropetrovsk Oblast, also suffered in subsequent attacks. The Kherson Oblast remains an area of particular Ukrainian air and artillery activity. Attacks included the pontoon crossings on the Dnieper near Nova Kakhovka and on Inhulets in Dar'ivka and – once again to hamper the occupying forces' repair work – the Antonivskyi and Kakhovskyi bridges.

On 13 September, Ukraine's Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov admitted that the lightning offensive had gone much better than expected. However, the success of the offensive remains a challenge for Ukrainian forces because of the need to ensure the conditions for holding the recaptured territory. Reznikov indicated that there was a threat of a Russian counterattack on the supply lines and that the Ukrainians could be surrounded if they went

too far. Referring to the situation in the Kherson Oblast, he said that the progress of the offensive there was much less due to the need to operate in difficult agricultural terrain criss-crossed by irrigation canals used by the enemy to create further lines of defence.

Danish Defence Minister Morten Bødskov has announced that a training course for Ukrainian soldiers will be organised on Danish territory along the lines of the one conducted in the UK, with Danish instructors. German sources report that Kyiv will receive the first two IRIS-T anti-aircraft missile launchers by the end of the year, followed by two more in 2023 – a further two. The Rheinmetall concern has refurbished 16 Marder infantry fighting vehicles and has begun repairing another 14 (despite the lack of permission from the Chancellery to hand them over to Ukraine). It also expresses its readiness to overhaul a further 70 vehicles of this type.

The head of the occupation administration of Crimea, Sergei Aksionov, acknowledged that pro-Ukrainian sentiment is on the rise on the peninsula. He pointed out that videos of public events in the region, during which pro-Ukrainian slogans are chanted and 'nationalist' songs are sung, are appearing in the information space. He also stated that both the organisers and participants of such events should be brought to justice and deprived of their jobs.

The authorities in Moscow are trying to sort out the message describing the situation on the frontline. In doing so, they are marginalising the losses suffered and claiming that Ukrainian successes have allegedly had no impact on the combat operations of Russian forces. On 12 September, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov announced that the special military operation was continuing and would continue until the original objectives were achieved. He added that Russia has no plans to withdraw its troops from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant site. Criticism of the military appearing in the official media space is, according to him, acceptable, but must not violate the applicable law. Peskov also stated that the issue of full or partial mobilisation is not discussed in the Kremlin and its announcement is not an option.

On 13 September, Head of the President's Office Andriy Jermak and former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen presented recommendations for a Kyiv Security Compact reaffirming the strategic partnership between Ukraine and the countries that guarantee its security (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Poland, Italy, Germany, France, Australia, Turkey, the Nordic, Baltic and Central European countries). It is to be concluded after the end of the war. The security guarantees would take the form of legal and political declarations by the signatories of the document towards Ukraine containing both preventive measures and commitments to take action in the event of another breach of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The package of guarantees is also to include, among other things : the implementation of long-term investment in the country's defence industry, further transfer of Western armaments, continued intelligence support, training missions and joint exercises under the auspices of the EU and NATO. Receiving security guarantees does not exclude Ukraine's aspiration to join the Alliance. The publication of the document was met with a sharp reaction from the Kremlin. Peskov stated that the draft means that Russia must continue to effectively conduct a special military operation.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration Olha Stefanishyna said that the Russian side had approached the Kyiv authorities several times in recent days with a proposal to start peace talks. In her opinion, the Kremlin's sudden

readiness to negotiate stems from its desire to stop the Ukrainian counter-offensive. In its view, Kyiv should only enter talks when Moscow rejects its policy of ultimatums and the terms of a potential agreement not only guarantee an end to the war, but also prevent Russia from resuming hostilities in the future.

In turn, the head of the foreign ministry, Dmytro Kuleba, stated that Ukraine does not rule out negotiations with Russia, but can only agree to them after full restoration of territorial integrity. According to the minister, there is currently no indication that the aggressor is ready to enter into serious negotiations. In Kuleba's view, Russia will show interest in real peace talks when it realises that its position has been weakened to the maximum and comes to terms with the fact that it is unable to maintain control over the seized territories.

The Council of Ministers has approved and forwarded the draft budget for 2023 to the Verkhovna Rada for consideration. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated that almost half of next year's projected funding – 1 trillion 136 billion hryvnia (approximately over 30 million euro) – would be allocated to strengthening the defence sector. Explaining the fourfold increase in military spending, the head of government said that the structure of the budget was subordinated to the priority goal of defeating Russia militarily.

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Grossi, announced on 12 September that he had initiated consultations with Ukraine and Russia on the creation of a 'safety zone' around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. According to him, both sides seem interested in the topic. In doing so, he stressed that he remains seriously concerned about the possibility of further shelling of the power plant. In his opinion, 'we are one step away from a nuclear accident', while 'the safety of the power plant is hanging by a thread'. The situation around the facility was also the subject of a telephone conversation between the Russian President and the German Chancellor on 13 September. Olaf Scholz was said to have convinced Vladimir Putin to immediately implement the measures recommended in the IAEA report. He also called on Russia to 'completely withdraw its troops from Ukraine' and to 'find a diplomatic solution to the conflict as soon as possible'.

Minister Kuleba expressed disappointment at the failure of the authorities in Berlin to agree to the delivery of German Leopard tanks to Ukraine. 'Not a single rational argument on why these weapons cannot be supplied, only abstract fears and excuses,' he wrote in reaction to a statement published the day before by German Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht, who refused the delivery because 'no country has yet supplied infantry fighting vehicles or Western-made battle tanks' and 'Germany would not take such a step unilaterally'.

Commentary

- The Ukrainian offensive in the Kharkiv Oblast, which resulted in Kyiv regaining almost all of the occupied part of the Oblast, began to fade. Ukrainian units focused on re-establishing control over the area recaptured from the occupying forces by 10 September and the area from which Russian troops withdrew without fighting in the following days. Going forward, their primary task will be to build new defence lines. It remains an open question to what extent the deceleration of the offensive was influenced by the losses suffered by the Ukrainian side, the consumption of war materials (indicated by a significant decrease in the defenders' artillery and aviation activity) and – likely – the lack of plans for its further expansion into the Luhansk Oblast. At the same time, on the

auxiliary strike direction – from the Donetsk Oblast – Ukrainian operations have so far failed to produce major gains, and the Russian defences have so far failed to break through. The result of the latter is a return to positional operations.

- Apart from an increase in the intensity of the use of air power, the Russians have so far taken no steps that could offset the extent of the defeat. There is no information on the movement of additional units to the theatre of operations, indicating that – at least in the near term – Russian forces will not gain the capacity for their own offensive to regain lost territory in the Kharkiv Oblast or in any other operational direction. A possible intensification of offensive operations by the aggressor, with an attempt to break through Ukrainian defence lines and seize new areas, would entail significant losses and would not guarantee success. The Ukrainian army faces similar risks in the event of another potential offensive – assuming the Russians do not once again make the same mistake and properly prepare defensive positions. The enemy's deeply entrenched defence in the Kherson Oblast prevented the Ukrainians from achieving any significant success despite the earlier disorganisation of the Russian hinterland.
- The successful counter-offensive has reinforced Ukrainian decision-makers' conviction that it is possible to defeat Russia militarily and force a full withdrawal from the occupied territories. At the same time, the conviction that the conflict must be resolved on the battlefield is largely determined by the Kremlin's inability to formulate a viable proposal for an agreement with the Ukrainian side. This inability stems from an awareness on the part of the authorities in Moscow that abandoning even part of the objectives set out by President Putin at the launch of the so-called special operation could provoke a negative reaction from Russian society. In turn, further escalation of terror and further attacks by the Russians will reassure the Ukrainian population that there is no alternative to a military solution to the conflict, especially since the ongoing war is considered in the collective consciousness of Ukrainians as a key moment in the history of the state, determining its continued existence as an independent entity. The willingness of Ukrainian society to make sacrifices and suffer significant losses at the price of maintaining its independence and the Kremlin's determination to implement its plan to subjugate Ukraine, postpone the possibility of ending the conflict in the foreseeable future.
- The progress of the Yermak–Rasmussen group shows that Kyiv wants to build the foundations of future state security in advance. However, the new vision of Ukraine's place in the European security system will be difficult to realise. For the signing of the agreement on guarantees requires the prior conclusion of a peace agreement with Russia. Difficulties will also be posed by the need to negotiate joint, precisely formulated agreements with all potential guarantor states, some of which may not be interested in such explicit support for Ukraine. On the other hand, the work on the treaty's assumptions is a signal to the Kremlin that Kyiv's policy even after the end of the conflict will not take into account Russia's security interests, but will be primarily aimed at seeking to permanently undermine Moscow's ambitions to dominate the region.