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Slowdown on the frontline. War after 207 days

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The main arena of fighting remains the Donbas. Ukrainian forces are repelling attacks in the Bakhmut area and localities southeast and south. Russian assaults are also being held southwest of Donetsk, while the frequency of hostile strikes northwest of the city and in the Avdiivka area has decreased. According to unconfirmed reports, Ukrainians have recaptured two villages near Lyman – south (Dibrova) and west (Shchurove) of the city.

On 18 September, the Russians were said to have unsuccessfully attacked defender positions in the recently liberated part of the Kharkiv Oblast – in the Kupiansk area (on 16 September, the Ukrainian volunteer sabotage and reconnaissance unit 'Kraken' reported that the city had been fully liberated) and near the border with Russia. Fighting also continues on the border of Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts. Ukrainian forces are repelling hostile assaults west of the Kherson–Mykolaiv road and near the border with Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. The defenders, however, failed to widen the breach on the eastern bank of the Inhulets River.

Russian artillery and aviation continued to strike at the positions and hinterland of Ukrainian forces along the entire line of contact and in the border areas of the Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. The Kharkiv and Chernihiv oblasts, as well as Avdiivka and Bakhmut (the city was largely destroyed) in the Donetsk Oblast, have come under massive fire. The aggressor does not cease its attacks on Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Nikopol, Sloviansk (the local thermal power station was destroyed) and Kramatorsk and its surroundings, as well as on towns south of the Kryvyi Rih and south-east of Zaporizhzhia.

Furthermore, the targets of missile attacks were Kharkiv, Kryvyi Rih (again the Karachunivskyi Reservoir dam), and Zaporizhzhia. On 19 September, a Russian rocket also hit the so-called industrial zone of the South Ukrainian Nuclear Power Plant in Yuzhnoukrainsk. Defenders were to shoot down enemy missiles over the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast and Uman. Ukrainian artillery and aviation attacked mainly in the Kherson Oblast (including the pontoon crossing at Novaya Kakhovka) and hit Svatove in the Luhansk Oblast, Donetsk, and Horlivka. According to the mayor of Melitopol, Ivan Fedorov, there were multiple explosions in the area of the airport and Russian bases around the city between 16–18 September.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Army has resumed reporting on losses and personnel problems of the Russian Armed Forces. During the withdrawal from the Kharkiv Oblast, the 11th Army Corps of the Baltic Fleet subdivisions were said to have lost more than 50 percent of their personnel and more than 200 pieces of armaments and military equipment. In turn, the 64th Mechanised Brigade of the Eastern Military District was to lose more than 90% of its personnel (killed, wounded, deserters, and those dismissed due to refusal to

participate in combat).

More M113 transporters have been sent to Ukraine by Lithuania. A Pentagon spokesman communicated that Kyiv would receive two batteries of NASAMS anti-aircraft missiles with a range of up to 40 km (a total of four launchers out of eight promised) over the next two months. After four months of negotiations, Germany agreed with Greece to transfer 40 BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine (the Greek army will receive German Marders in exchange for them). According to Welt am Sonntag, Berlin has also agreed to sell Kyiv 18 155 mm caliber RCH 155 self-propelled howitzers (on a Boxer wheeled armoured personnel carrier chassis). The value of the contract is estimated at €216 million, and the first units are expected to be ready no earlier than March 2025. The Infodefensa portal reported that the first 20 Ukrainian soldiers are scheduled to arrive in Spain on 19 September to be trained in handling tanks, large-caliber artillery munitions, and anti-aircraft batteries.

On 16 September, the Ukrainian government approved a draft law on criminal liability for accepting a Russian passport. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories Iryna Vereshchuk conveyed that the following amendments to the Criminal Code are planned: a government official who accepts a Russian passport is to be punished by 10–15 years' imprisonment; a person who encourages the acceptance of such a passport may be sentenced to 5–8 years' imprisonment, and one who coerces such conduct to 8–12 years. The same sanction is to be imposed for creating conditions in which failure to obtain a Russian passport restricts a Ukrainian citizen's rights or otherwise places them at a disadvantage. Russians working in the occupation administration will also be prosecuted for offenses related to 'passportisation'.

On 17 September, the Belarusian army's military exercises were extended until 24 September. They will occur at training grounds in the Minsk, Grodno, and Brest oblasts. The training activity has been held continuously since 29 April.

On 16 September, during a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Samarkand, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that the military operation in Ukraine 'is not subject to adjustment' and that its main objective is 'the liberation of the entire territory of the Donbas'. He added that offensive operations in other directions would continue and admitted that the slowness of the military operation was due to the involvement in Ukraine not of the entire army but only of contract soldiers. Putin said that Russian forces are proceeding with restraint; nevertheless, they will not give up precision attacks on Ukrainian critical infrastructure.

On 16 September, an adviser to the head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Mykhailo Podolak, confirmed that Ukrainian forces were behind the attacks on collaborators in the Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. The actions of sabotage groups in the Russian military's hinterland are causing enough concern that the collaborationist authorities in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast are considering issuing firearms to civilian officials. On 17 September, the head of the so-called civil-military administration stated that this would help improve their security in the face of the constant threat of attempts on their lives. The day before, the deputy of the so-called mayor of Berdiansk and his wife, who served as chairwoman of the so-called referendum committee, were shot dead. Also, on 17 September, saboteurs damaged the railway line connecting Crimea to Melitopol. In response to this incident, in the

occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, the Russian National Guard continued to arrest those suspected of collaborating with the Ukrainian military or special services. On 17 September, it was reported that 52 people were detained, and two weapons caches were discovered.

Reports of abandoning the organisation of the so-called annexation referendum are confirmed. On 17 September, the occupation authorities in Luhansk issued a statement that they were postponing the referendum indefinitely and that it was currently impossible to hold it due to the situation on the frontline. Earlier, representatives of the occupation authorities in Kherson and Melitopol made similar announcements.

President Volodymyr Zelensky did not rule out that Ukraine would seek to regain Crimea through diplomacy. He stressed that he sees no alternative to the "de-occupation" of the peninsula, but in his view, citizens are more in favour of a diplomatic solution to the problem. He pointed out that Ukraine will only regain a sense of security when it has regained all its territories.

On 18 September, 10 vessels transporting 169,300 tonnes of agricultural products left Ukrainian ports as part of the 'grain initiative', and on 19 September, a further four ships departed with a cargo of 178,780 tonnes. The Ministry of Infrastructure said that a total of 169 vessels with foodstuffs have already left Ukrainian ports since the start of the agreement, heading for countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa and that a total of 3.9 million tonnes of agricultural products have been exported.

Commentary

• The situation on the front after the expiry of the Ukrainian offensive in the Kharkiv Oblast indicates that, once again, neither side can achieve a visible advantage. Russian forces are concentrating on the Donbas, while the defenders are trying to expand their holdings in the Kharkiv (along with the border part of the Donetsk Oblast) and Kherson oblasts. In both cases, the advancing units fail to break through the enemy's defences, with the only successes coming from occupying territory in the no-man's-land strip. Success in regaining control of most of the occupied part of the Kharkiv Oblast has motivated the Ukrainian side to renew attacks. In the absence of a significant reinforcement of Russian forces, the defenders' progress must therefore be considered a matter of time. Unlike the offensives in the Kharkiv Oblast, they are unlikely to be spectacular, and their gains will be associated with increased casualties.

• What is notable about Putin's statement on the prospect of continued military action in Ukraine is that he indirectly justified Russian failures for the first time since the start of the aggression. Although he did not go as far as openly criticising the General Staff, the position he expressed nevertheless shows that he is aware of the inefficiency of the Russian forces. His statement lends credence to the thesis that the Kremlin needs the pause necessary to regain the combat capability of units that suffered heavy losses in the fighting in Ukraine.