

Belarus mobilises forces. 232nd day of the war

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Russia continues its attacks on critical infrastructure facilities across Ukraine, but they are limited compared to the strikes on Monday. Defenders report the destruction of many missiles and most kamikaze drones obtained from Iran (National Security and Defence Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov estimated that the aggressor loses 85–90% of the drones used in the attacks). The Russians attacked energy installations in Khmelnytskyi, Cherkasy, Chernivtsi, Dnipropetrovsk, Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Rivne, Ternopil, Vinnytsia (including the Ladyzhyn thermal power plant again) and Zhytomyr oblasts, among others. On 13 October, unspecified war materials, most likely military support from the West, were to be destroyed in a rocket attack on military warehouses in the Zolochiv area.

Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia and Nikopol have been permanently shelled and bombed, and with slightly less intensity, Kharkiv, where energy infrastructure has also become the primary target. Russian artillery and aviation also continue to attack Ukrainian army positions and facilities along the line of contact and in the border areas of Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. The heaviest strikes occurred in Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast, Kupiansk in Kharkiv Oblast and Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Ukrainian forces mainly shelled and bombarded Russian army positions and facilities in Kherson and Luhansk oblasts. In eastern Ukraine, they were met with solid counter-air defence from the enemy – the Ukrainian side confirmed the loss of three aircraft in two days. Ukrainian sabotage activity continues in Melitopol. On 13 October, there was also said to have been an explosion at an ammunition depot in the Belgorod Oblast of Russia bordering Ukraine.

Russian forces continue to advance on Ukrainian positions in Donbas. The Russians have fortified themselves on the southern outskirts of Bakhmut and pushed Ukrainian forces out of areas east of the southbound road to Horlivka (the fighting for Maiorskis still to continue in this area, while the Russian advance has moved west into the Ozaryanivka region). On the other hand, attempts to attack Bakhmut from the east and north-east of Bakhmut (Bakhmutske, Soledar), as well as further attacks north (Vesele) and West (Nevelske) of Donetsk, were to fail.

The Russians unsuccessfully tried several times to break Ukrainian positions on the border of Donetsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts and south of the village of Davydiv Brid in Kherson Oblast. Ukrainian forces were to renew their assault on Russian positions east of Kupiansk, towards Svatove on the border of Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts, as well as in the north-west of Kherson Oblast and towards Kherson, without success.

According to Oleksiy Danilov, Russia had used up the vast majority of its missiles after 24 February, with 25–28% of its previous stockpile remaining. However, data from the Ukrainian Navy HQ shows that Russia still retains a significant attack capability. On 12 October, it was to keep two vessels with 16 Kalibr missiles on operational alert in the Black Sea and 11 vessels with a single salvo of 76 missiles in the Mediterranean (the grouping was to include the nuclear-powered cruise missile submarine Severodvinsk).

On 12 October, the sixth meeting of the countries supporting Ukraine militarily took place in the Ramstein format, at which the defence ministries announced further deliveries of armaments and military equipment. Germany is to deliver further PzH 2000 self-propelled howitzers and MARS II multiple rocket launchers, the Netherlands €15 million worth of missiles for air defence systems, Canada a support package worth \$47 million, including artillery ammunition worth \$15.2 million, and Lithuania among others, 120 mm mortars on M113 transporters, all-terrain vehicles, drones and thermal imagers. The following day, the transfer of support packages was also announced by Spain (four HAWK system anti-aircraft missile launchers), Portugal (six Ka-32 rescue and firefighting helicopters previously acquired from Russia), Estonia (ammunition, among other things) and the UK (AMRAAM missiles for NASAMS launchers to be supplied by the Americans, anti-aircraft missiles of other types, drones and 18 howitzers).

The Canadian defence ministry specified that the aid package to Ukraine also includes 500,000 winter uniforms and satellite communications equipment worth \$2 million. The donation of winter uniforms comes in response to Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov's late summer appeal to NATO for the urgent delivery of this equipment for 200,000 troops. A day later, the ministry confirmed that the essential winter equipment for the Armed Forces units had arrived.

On 13 October, Ukraine signed a military aid agreement with France envisaging the establishment of a special fund with a budget of €100 million. One element of the agreement is to be the supply of armaments. President Emmanuel Macron announced that France is 'working' on transferring a further six CAESAR howitzers to Ukraine.

Another four US HIMARS launchers and the first battery (three launchers) of Germany's IRIS-T short-range air defence system have arrived in Ukraine. German Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht announced that the Ukrainian army would receive the remaining three batteries of the system in 2023 (it was initially announced that two of the four promised batteries would be delivered this autumn). German PzH 2000 howitzers, overhauled in Lithuania, have also returned to Ukraine. German arms company Rheinmetall has agreed to supply Prague with Leopard 2A4 tanks and Buffel ARV technical protection vehicles for the Czech Republic, in return for which Prague is to hand over post-Soviet equipment to Ukraine. The Czech army is expected to receive the first units in December 2022, with the entire exchange to be completed by the end of 2023.

A spokesman for the Ukrainian Air Force Command considered the announcements regarding the delivery of NASAMS and IRIS-T air defence systems to be a step in the right direction – however, an insufficient one to provide proper airspace cover over Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelensky told Western partners that the country has only 10 per cent of the systems needed to achieve this goal. According to CNN, during a meeting of the 'Ramstein 6' group, Ukraine reiterated its request to increase the number of (short-range) air

defence systems being transferred and to start supplying long-range systems and missiles for the post-Soviet Buk-M1 and S-300 systems. It also listed additional artillery systems in NATO standards among its priorities, with 155 mm ammunition and Soviet 152 mm and 122 mm calibres, radiolocation stations, coastal defence, radio-electronic warfare and tanks.

On 11 October, the Ukrainian president proposed to the leaders of the G7 countries to deploy an international observer mission on the border with Belarus. Its purpose would be to monitor the security situation, which would help disavow Russian and Belarusian accusations that Ukrainian forces were preparing attacks on Belarusian territory. So far, Zelensky's appeal has gone unanswered.

Information is confirmed that in Belarus, contrary to the authorities' declarations, there is a "silent" mobilisation under the guise of a test of mobilisation capabilities. On 11 October, the Secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus, Alyaksandr Valfovich, announced that – under Lukashenko's order – another test of the armed forces' combat readiness had begun. On 13 October, Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin stated that the army was taking preventive measures to prevent escalation near its borders with NATO countries and Ukraine. In an interview published on 14 October, the head of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Vladimir Makei, admitted that an anti-terrorist operation regime had been introduced in Belarus because of the growing threat of provocations on the state border (with Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Latvia). He confirmed earlier information from KGB chief Ivan Tertel that planned operations might involve attempts to 'seize part of the country's territory', with Ukraine allegedly claiming part of Belarus. Tertel expressed the opinion as recently as 11 October that Western intelligence services had trained between 100 and 300 'militants' in Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland to carry out armed provocation. He added that terrorist attacks could target rail and military infrastructure used by the joint Russian-Belarusian military grouping. He warned that any attempts by 'saboteurs' to get through would be met with an immediate fire opening.

On 12 October, anti-terrorist exercises by officers of the Belarusian Interior Ministry began in Yel'sk (Gomel Oblast), near the border with Ukraine. Their scenario involved repelling an attack by an armed squad on the town and preventing an attempt to seize local administration buildings. A day earlier, Ukrainian military intelligence (Hulevich) confirmed that Russian forces on the territory of Belarus have approx. 40 Iranian Shahed-136 combat drones, and the country continues to supply Russia with ammunition and military equipment from its resources. Twelve wagons (492 tonnes) of artillery ammunition from a depot in Dobrush (Gomel Oblast) have been diverted to Crimea. Also planned for the near future is the redeployment of 13 rail means of transport with armaments (including T-72 tanks), military equipment (219 platforms) and ammunition (28 wagons). According to Hulevich, these will be diverted to the Rostov Oblast.

On 13 October, the commander of the Combined Armed Forces of Ukraine, Serhiy Naye, stated that he did not rule out that the Russian army – together with the Belarusian Armed Forces – would attempt to create the conditions for a repeat offensive. He acknowledged that military activity on Belarusian territory is receiving special attention from military reconnaissance units. According to Naye, about 1,000 Russian troops are permanently stationed in Belarus (not counting the manning of the Vileyka naval communication centre and the Baranavichy radar station), six Su-30 and Su-35 multi-role aircraft,

four Iskander missile sets and 12 S-400 air defence missile systems. Steps are also being taken to prepare more airfields there and the infrastructure for the deployment of additional Russian troops. According to Nayevev, around 500 troops can be expected to be sent to the Brest Oblast and more than 300 to the Vitebsk Oblast, but there is no information on what equipment these units are to be equipped with.

Commentary

- Over the past week, there has been a slowdown in Ukrainian offensive operations in all directions. To what extent is this due to the need to replenish losses and the need to rest fighting soldiers, and to what extent is the result of the strengthening of Russian defences, remains an open question. The deceleration may be temporary, and the pressure on Russian positions in Kherson and Luhansk oblasts will continue. It is in Ukraine's interest to gain as many territorial gains as quickly as possible, as the aggressor's forces are systematically strengthened as part of the ongoing mobilisation. Indeed, success will be increasingly difficult to achieve in the months ahead – even with new deliveries of arms and military equipment from the West. The deterioration of weather conditions with the onset of autumn and winter will also benefit the Russian side as it defends itself (in strictly military terms). However, it remains uncertain whether the aggressor will be able to build up sufficient forces in the theatre of operations to launch its offensive in the coming months.
- Subsequent announcements of Western military support for Ukraine have brought no breakthrough. Although the Ukrainian army has received in recent days the first modern air defence systems (IRIS-T), is about to receive another (more capable NASAMS) and will also receive older types of systems (HAWK, probably also Crotale), their number remains far from sufficient to effectively cover the airspace above the country. Ukraine will still be unable to protect all critical infrastructure facilities, and the acquired equipment will only improve the effectiveness of defence in selected areas. It should be remembered that Ukrainian declarations about the destruction of Russian means of aerial attack (missiles and drones) are often significantly exaggerated (although drones remain a relatively easy target and certainly the losses incurred by the aggressor in this category of weaponry are high) and mainly serve to maintain the morale of defenders and the public.
- Contrary to official communiqués from the Belarusian authorities denying that mobilisation is taking place, the army remains in constant combat readiness, and 'checks' on mobilisation capabilities involving calling in reservists for monthly military exercises do indeed take place. Minsk's admission that an 'anti-terrorist operation' (not officially announced) is underway in the country, as well as the increased activity of the KGB and the Interior Ministry, testify to the 'militarisation' of the entire state apparatus. This procedure is the implementation of Lukashenko's arrangements with Putin related to the development of a joint military grouping and confirms that the Belarusian forces and security apparatus are ready to repel aggression from NATO countries or Ukraine. So far, no significant Russian forces have been transferred to Belarus, but it is possible that additional units equipped with missile systems or multi-role aircraft or airborne military subdivisions will be sent there.