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Martial law in the annexed territories of Ukraine. 237th day of the war

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Russian forces moved north of Avdiivka and southwest of Bakhmut. However, subsequent aggressor assaults on that city's southern and eastern outskirts, in the Bakhmutivka area, north and west of Horlivka and an arc west of Donetsk, failed. Ukrainian troops also repulsed attacks to the southeast and northeast of Siversk. The intensity of Russian offensive operations in the areas of the Kharkiv Oblast recaptured by the defenders in September increased, with attacks occurring southeast and north of Kupiansk, where the attackers were expected to have little success, and west of Vovchansk, which lies on the Russian border. A Ukrainian attempt to break through enemy positions south of Davydiv Brid in the Kherson Oblast was to fail.

The invaders are expected to gather additional forces in Luhansk and Kherson oblasts. In Kherson alone, the number of Russian soldiers is estimated at 20,000 to 25,000, with them said to be demoralised and not showing any readiness to fight. The aggressor has built an improvised crossing under the damaged Antonov Bridge on the Dnieper (Ukrainian forces were already expected to launch attacks on it). Russian sources estimate the reinforcement of Ukrainian troops in the Kherson Oblast at tens of thousands of additional troops. The Ukrainians have also intensified operations in Zaporizhzhia Oblast, where many drones have been redeployed. On the front line south of Zaporizhzhia, the activity of their sabotage and reconnaissance groups increased. Most likely due to their actions, explosions occurred in Crimea – in Dzhankoi and Sevastopol (in the Belbek airport area) – and the Russian Belgorod.

The invaders continue their attacks on energy infrastructure in various parts of Ukraine. Their targets have been Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Kamianske, Kryvyi Rih, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, Zhytomyr and facilities in Khmelnytskyi, Vinnytsia and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts, some of them were hit repeatedly. The Ukrainians reported shooting down some rockets and most of the attacking kamikaze drones. Artillery and aviation from both sides launched attacks on enemy positions and facilities along the contact line. The Russians shelled and bombarded the border areas of Sumy and, to a lesser extent, Chernihiv oblasts.

According to a communiqué from the head of Ukrainian military intelligence, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, the first batch of Iranian kamikaze drones ordered by the enemy numbered 1,750. The Ukrainian systems are expected to shoot down 'close to 70%' of the attacking drones (the Air Force Command had previously estimated the defence effectiveness at 85%). Budanov also stated that the stockpile of missiles for Iskander systems had fallen to

13%, with a safe minimum set at 30%. In turn, the Air Force Command reported that between 13 September, when the first downing was reported, and 19 October, the defenders had neutralised 223 Shahed-136 kamikaze drones (designated in Russia as Geran-2). Earlier, Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov reported that the enemy had fewer than 300 Iranian drones left.

On 18 October, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO will soon provide Ukraine with hundreds of drone jammers for use against Russian and Iranian drones. Germany handed Kyiv five Bergepanzer 2 armoured recovery vehicles (it has delivered ten in total since August), 167,000 small arms cartridges, seven unspecified pontoon systems, winter uniforms and heating equipment. On 16 October, the handover of German Marder infantry fighting vehicles to Greece began (six have been sent, with another 14 due to arrive by 21 October and 20 more at an unspecified later date), in return for which it is to supply Ukraine with 40 post-Soviet BMP-1s.

On 19 October, Vladimir Putin signed a decree 'On the introduction of martial law on the territories of the Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts'. The justification cited the law of 30 January 2002. 'On Martial Law', allowing it to be imposed on parts of Russian territory to repel aggression. The President instructed the Prime Minister to set up a special inter-ministerial coordination council to organise the functioning of the territories subject to martial law and to secure the 'special military operation'. He also called on the Defence Ministry and other power ministries to present a plan for their operations in the martial regime territories within three days. Putin said that the decision on martial law was a reaction to Ukrainian 'terrorist attacks' on the Crimean Bridge and other critical infrastructure facilities of the Russian Federation. At the same time, the Kremlin decided not to impose martial law in the regions bordering Ukraine and occupied Crimea.

The day before, on 18 October, the commander of the Joint Group of Forces in the 'special military operation' zone, Sergey Surovikin, gave an interview wherein he admitted that the situation on the frontline was tense and that Ukrainian forces were not giving up attacking Russian positions. He announced that to minimise Russian losses, the pace of the advance would be slowed down, and measures would be taken to increase the combat and numerical strength of units, create additional reserves and strengthen defensive positions across the front line. Surovikin, who still serves as the Russian Air and Space Forces commander, attached great importance to continuing air and combat drone attacks on military facilities and critical infrastructure. He described the situation in the Kherson area as difficult. He acknowledged that infrastructure facilities and transport routes across the Dnieper river are being destroyed due to Ukrainian rocket fire. He accused Kyiv of allegedly preparing a massive rocket attack on the Kachovka hydroelectric dam and stated that the priority was the smooth evacuation of the population to the left bank of the Dnieper. At the same time, plans to hold Kherson would depend on tactical developments. The occupation authorities estimate that the evacuation will involve 50,000–60,000 people. Surovikin further indicated that Moscow's political goal is to bring Moscow to a situation where Ukraine 'will be independent of the West and NATO' and become a state friendly to Russia.

On 19 October, the Belarusian defence ministry once again dismissed information about the alleged mobilisation but admitted that military commissions are conducting a 'routine'

registration of persons fit for military service and that activities to check mobilisation capacity will be completed by the end of the year. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, covert mobilisation is underway in Belarus under the pretext of periodic training of reservists at training grounds. Great importance is attached to training additional tank crews and anti-aircraft missile system operators.

Commentary

- The message from the parties is that the forthcoming battle for Kherson will be one of the most challenging and – politically – most important battles since the outbreak of the war. The measures taken by the Russians show that they want to hinder the expected Ukrainian attack by various means, not only military. A mass evacuation of the population from the Kherson Oblast could lead to a massacre of civilians if Kyiv decides to launch an attack while it is underway. Surovikin's suggestion that the Ukrainian military is planning to destroy the dam on the Kakhovka Reservoir (which would lead to submerging of a large part of the currently Russian-occupied right-bank area of Kherson Oblast, including Kherson) may suggest that Moscow itself does not rule out the possibility of blowing it up in order to accuse Kyiv of doing so. With the withdrawal of Russian units to the left bank of the Dnieper and the entry of significant Ukrainian forces into the now-occupied territory, the latter would find themselves trapped.
- The potential problems that the Ukrainian army would have to face in the event of a decision to recapture Kherson, combined with intensified reconnaissance and logistical operations and the destruction of Russian facilities in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, suggest that Kyiv does not rule out this oblast becoming the main direction of the strike. This could happen not only in the event of a setback in the Kherson Oblast, as the actions taken on the outskirts of Kherson may also mask the real target of the main attack. The recapture of this city would be politically significant. However, it would not bring Ukraine any significant strategic gains, while the seizure of the junctional Melitopol would again cut Crimea off from its overland connection to Russia. This success – along with the obstruction of the crossing to the peninsula after the Kerch Strait bridge was damaged – would significantly facilitate the Ukrainian army's further efforts to recapture the peninsula, and the relatively effective Russian occupation area would be restricted to Donbas.
- The imposition of martial law in the territories occupied by Russia (other than Crimea) follows Moscow's earlier decision to annex them within administrative boundaries. Some areas that the Russians formally recognized as their own, are under Ukrainian control, and hostilities are taking place there. Putin considered the presence of Ukrainian forces on these territories an act of aggression towards the Russian Federation. This means that future Russian military action will focus on breaking Ukrainian forces' positions in the country's south and east. However, it is not excluded that Russia, to succeed there, will also decide to move in other directions.
- Surovikin's public statement may indicate a revision of the Russian defence ministry's previous information policy based on daily laconic communiqués describing the situation on the frontline. The statement is intended to confirm Surovikin's autonomy in planning and implementing further combat operations in Ukraine. Acknowledging that there are

great difficulties in repelling Ukrainian attacks on the front is meant to suggest the possibility of surrendering Kherson in a veiled way. In turn, emphasising the importance of air force operations may foreshadow an intensification of Ukrainian territory's air attacks (including bombing).