Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 28.10.2022 www.osw.waw.pl

Ukrainian offensive is slowing down. 246th day of the war

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski

The Ukrainian General Staff identifies the Donetsk Oblast as the arena of the heaviest fighting. Russian forces were to make successive unsuccessful assaults on Bakhmut and its southern outskirts and towns to the northeast and southwest of the city. The defenders are to consistently repel attacks east of Siversk, on the outskirts of Horlivka and north-west of Horlivka, in and north of the Andriivka area and in an arc west of Donetsk. The Russians were also expected to resume their offensive in the Velyka Novosilka area in the western part of Donetsk Oblast.

Local reports indicate that heavy fighting is taking place on the border of the Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts, where Ukrainian forces are attempting to break through Russian defences east of Kupiansk (Mykolaivka, Orlanske) and towards Svatove (Kuzemivka), as well as along the line of the Zherebets River at the junction of the Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. On 24 October, the Ukrainian General Staff reported the liberation of four villages in these areas. However, earlier reports indicate that three of them are in areas occupied by Ukrainian forces between 4 and 9 October (Miasozharivka and Nevske in Luhansk Oblast and Novosadove in Donetsk Oblast), and the fourth in a no-man's land between Russian-occupied localities (Karmazynivka). In addition, the defenders were to repel attacks in the part of Kharkiv Oblast bordering Russia, east of Vovchansk. In Luhansk Oblast, on the other hand, the Russians were to hold off the Ukrainian advance northwest of Kreminna.

Ukrainian forces were to continue their unsuccessful efforts to break Russian positions between Davydiv Brid and Dudchany north of Kherson and west of the city, on the border of Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts. Attempts to improve the tactical position were also said to have been made by the Russians. Ukrainian sources report that additional Russian forces, mainly freshly mobilised soldiers (around 1,000), are being moved to the right bank of the Dnieper. The invaders are also expected to direct reinforcements to Zaporizhzhia Oblast, where additional Ukrainian units are also expected to arrive.

The Russians continue their attacks on Ukraine's critical infrastructure, but their numbers – compared to those at the beginning of the week – have been significantly reduced. Targets of kamikaze missiles and drones included Dnipro (a fuel base was destroyed), Kramatorsk, Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia, as well as facilities in Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Odesa and Vinnytsia oblasts. According to President Volodymyr Zelensky, the Russian army was expected to launch nearly 4,500 rockets into Ukraine during the eight months of the war. The aggressor's artillery and aviation continued to attack Ukrainian army positions and facilities along the line of contact and in the border areas of Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. The Ukrainians mainly shelled and bombarded enemy positions and facilities in Kherson Oblast and Donbas. The

targets of their largest attack were a fuel base and a railway station in Shakhtarsk in Donetsk Oblast. Ukrainian sabotage activities were reported in the Melitopol area (targets included a railway bridge in Svitlodolynske) and at a thermal power plant in Balaklava, Crimea.

Germany handed over to Ukraine the previously announced additional two MARS II multiple rocket launchers (the Ukrainian army received five in total), four 155 mm PzH 2000 howitzers (in total, Germany and the Netherlands have so far handed over 14 howitzers of this type), as well as 6100 155 mm calibre artillery shells and 186,000 rounds for 40 mm grenade launchers. The US is preparing a further $275 m military support package, including the supply of munitions, including missiles for the HIMARS launcher. Australia is to provide an additional 30 Bushmaster transporters and send 70 instructors to train Ukrainian soldiers in the UK. In turn, the Lithuanian defence ministry has donated seven Toyota Land Cruiser 200 off-road vehicles.

On 26 October, Ukraine's Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov admitted that offensive operations towards Kherson were being delayed due to poor weather conditions caused by heavy rainfall. The advance of troops is also hampered by the use of irrigation canals by Russian units as additional fortifications of the defence line. In Reznikov's opinion, Russian forces will not risk fighting in the city, especially when Ukrainian forces are effectively destroying the Dnieper River crossings. He did not rule out that, faced with the impossibility of guaranteeing the security of the lines of communication, the Russians would decide to leave Kherson. A day later, the deputy head of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of Ukraine, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, forecasting possible developments in the city area, did not rule out a possible retreat of Russian troops. He warned that the invaders might force the local population to evacuate en masse and use 'scorched earth' tactics, destroying critical infrastructure facilities and residential buildings. He did not rule out the possibility that the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant could be destroyed and Ukraine could be accused of causing a humanitarian disaster. On 27 October, President Zelensky stated that Russian troops were not ready to leave Kherson and that their alleged preparation for withdrawal was part of a disinformation operation. Its aim is to encourage Ukrainian forces to become more involved in this direction and to weaken the military presence on other sections of the frontline. He assured that attempts to retake Kherson would be repeated but that the Ukrainian army's operations would be conducted in such a way as to avoid excessive casualties.

According to an assessment provided by the Ukrainian General Staff on 27 October, Russian soldiers are facing the problem of insufficient personal equipment. The lack of warm clothing has led to increased incidents of theft by Russians in the occupied territory of the Kherson Oblast. The General Staff also has information that mobilised enemy soldiers who have arrived at the front have not received adequate training and lack practical skills in using basic weapons. Much of the armaments and military equipment that the Russians have been sending towards Donetsk is incompletely operational or not fit for combat use at all (especially T-62 tanks).

On 25 October, Minister for the Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories Iryna Vereshchuk urged Ukrainians who had gone abroad not to return to the country for the winter if possible. She cited the energy crisis caused by the large-scale destruction of the

facilities of this infrastructure and transmission lines. In her assessment, the situation will continue to worsen.

On 27 October, the acting head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), Vasyl Malyuk, indicated that the Russian special services were using people linked to the structures of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to carry out intelligence tasks. He added that since the beginning of the war, suspicions of cooperation with the Russians have been formulated against 33 clergymen and 23 criminal proceedings have been opened in connection with the transfer of intelligence and information increasing the precision of missile attacks. He also revealed that the SBU, police and National Guard are conducting an operation to vet employees of energy infrastructure facilities. He announced that the SBU is in the process of 'cleansing' its ranks of those collaborating with the Russians.

On 25 October, the representative of the Ukrainian President in the Verkhovna Rada, Fedir Venislavskyi, assured that the Ukrainian Armed Forces are fully equipped with the necessary clothing for the winter period and have the necessary reserves. He acknowledged that a significant concern was the depletion of 152 mm calibre ammunition intended for Soviet model armament.

On 25 October, the State Border Service of Ukraine reported that there is no change in the nature of operations or the numerical composition of the units of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus stationed along the border with Ukraine. Military reconnaissance data shows that the organisation of a Russian-Belarusian strike grouping has not begun. A day earlier, the head of Ukrainian military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, estimated that there are currently 3,200 Russian soldiers in Belarus.

Meetings are being organised at workplaces in Belarus with representatives of the armed forces and special services. They aim to highlight the allegedly growing threat to the country's security from NATO. On 26 October, the deputy head of the State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus, Siarhei Terebov, warned that foreign-inspired actions would be taken in November/December to provoke social tensions in the student community. The KGB and law enforcement agencies note a likely increase in the threat of external intervention (terrorist attacks and sabotage) from the territory of Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Ukraine.

On 25 October, adviser to the head of the President's Office Mykhailo Podolak, commenting on the SBU's detention of Vyacheslav Bohuslayev, the former President of the Motor Sich aviation plant, accused of supporting the aggressor, did not rule out the possibility of him being exchanged for Ukrainian soldiers in captivity. Held in custody for three months, Bohuslayev has held Russian citizenship since 2000. On 27 October, his defence lawyer claimed that the Ukrainian authorities were aware of talks the accused had with a Russian recipient in 2021 about implementing contracts.

Commentary

- The transition of Russian forces to defence in most directions (the Donbas invariably being the exception), as well as the progressive expansion and numerical strengthening of defensive positions by the aggressor, has led to a reversal of the military situation relative to that in the late spring and summer. As the attacking side, the Ukrainian army

found itself in a situation analogous to that of the Russians. However, while the paucity of Russian advances was due to the thinness of the units involved, which had a firepower advantage over the defenders, the slowdown of the Ukrainian offensive is not due to insufficient numbers of troops (in this respect the Ukrainians have an advantage over the aggressor), but to the lack of adequate heavy weaponry. This makes it significantly more difficult for Ukrainian forces to break through the extensive defensive positions and develop success deep into the Russian grouping. What draws attention to this is that the Ukrainians, as the attacking side, are using the same tactics that the Russians have used before, based on systematically repeated attacks by a company (less often battalion) tactical groups.

- Statements by representatives of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence leadership explaining the lack of visible progress of the offensive in the Kherson Oblast testify to the authorities' concern not so much about the development of the situation on the front but about potential public discontent. Indeed, the military successes were presented as a Ukrainian response to Russian attacks on civilian objects. The success of the operation in Kharkiv Oblast in early September and the progress made in late September and early October in Donbas (especially the recapture of Lyman) and Kherson Oblast raised hopes for the imminent ousting of the aggressor from further occupied areas and the optimistic announcements made by government representatives allowed them to be regarded as fully justified. The imminent recapture of Kherson was made more likely by reports that the Russians had ordered an evacuation from the right-bank part of Kherson Oblast. This was also supported by Russian information policy (especially the statement of General Surovikin, commanding the operation, indicating that difficult decisions had to be taken, which was interpreted as an announcement of the surrender of the city).
- The SBU's activity continues to focus on counter-intelligence tasks. More individuals and circles susceptible to the influence of the Russian secret services are being unmasked. The indication by the head of the SBU that the clergy of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate are involved in hostile intelligence activities is also an attempt to weaken its influence on Ukrainian society. The intensification of the SBU's activity and the strengthening of its internal security division conducting verification of possible links between its employees and Russian services are aimed at regaining its credibility damaged at the beginning of the war. Revealed acts of betrayal by SBU officers show that the SBU is still struggling with the negative consequences of the abandonment of staff vetting after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity.