

Kremlin energy blackmail. 274th day of the war

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On 23 November, the Russians launched another massive attack on Ukraine's critical infrastructure facilities. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the total number of missile strikes was 78. The defenders were to shoot down 51 of the 67 cruise missiles used by the enemy and 5 of the 10 Lancet strike drones. The main target of the attack was Kyiv and its surroundings, on which 30 missiles were launched (20 of which were to be shot down). At least 16 energy facilities (thermal power plants, hydropower plants and substations) in Kyiv and eight oblasts were hit. The attack on Vyshhorod in Kyiv Oblast was particularly severe, killing or injuring dozens of people.

The damage and the ensuing emergency power cuts led to a blackout across the country and partially in Moldova, which is connected to the country's power system. All units of the operating nuclear power plants (Khmelnyskyi, Rivne and South Ukrainian; the occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant had already been disconnected from the Ukrainian power system by the Russians) were disconnected from the grid for safety reasons. By the evening of 24 November, the system was securing less than 50% of the country's energy needs, and electricity and running water (municipal waterworks need electricity to operate) were in short supply in 15 oblasts. As late as the morning of 25 November, 50% of the capital's consumers were still without power, but most of the city's water supply had already been restored.

Regardless of the attacks on the energy infrastructure, Russian rockets fell daily in the Zaporizhzhia region. Amongst others, the Vilniansk maternity hospital became a target, reverberating worldwide. The aggressor's artillery and aviation also continue to strike enemy positions and facilities along the line of contact and in areas bordering Russia. Kherson and its surroundings are being severely shelled (in total, Russian artillery has attacked the city 62 times since 20 November). Ukrainian forces have shelled and bombarded enemy positions and facilities in the main combat areas. Ukrainian diversion acts occurred again in Melitopol and Tokmak in Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

The heaviest fighting is taking place in the Bakhmut area – for control of villages northeast and south of the city. Defenders have again appealed to the remaining population in and around Bakhmut to evacuate immediately. In addition, in the Donetsk Oblast, the Russians attempted to break through enemy positions east of Siversk, west of Horlivka, north of Avdiivka and west of Donetsk. Both sides unsuccessfully attacked each other's positions in Luhansk Oblast – near the border with Kharkiv Oblast north-east of Svatove and north and west of Kreminna.

The US Department of Defense has announced the 26th (as of August 2021) military support package for Ukraine. It is worth \$400 million and includes ammunition for NASAMS and HIMARS systems, 150 large-calibre machine guns, 200 155mm calibre precision ammunition and 10,000 120mm mortar grenades and HARM anti-radiation missiles. From the UK, the Ukrainian army is to receive three Sea King helicopters (one has already arrived in the country, crew training took six weeks), 10,000 artillery shells and Brimstone 2 anti-tank missiles. The Ukrainian General Staff confirmed that 7,600 soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces had received basic training abroad, and training of another 2,900 soldiers is ongoing. He added that such undertakings also occur at the training grounds of partner countries of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

In response to further damage to power grids, the authorities in Kyiv announced on 22 November that more than 4,000 so-called 'unbreakable points' had been opened. These provide free access to electricity, water, medical supplies, mobile communications, and the internet. The points operate in all local administration offices, as well as in schools, buildings of the State Emergency Service, and post offices. According to Ukrainian military intelligence forecasts, the enemy will continue its indiscriminate missile attacks and will need about a week to prepare for the next one (Russian reserves of precision weapons are expected to run low, apart from missiles for S-300 systems).

On 24 November, Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov stated in an ultimatum tone that Kyiv must meet Russia's demands to 'restore the situation to normal'. He reiterated the conditions for peace: recognising the annexation of part of Ukraine's territory and carrying out so-called demilitarisation as the only way 'to stop all possible suffering of the civilian population'.

On the same day, Alexander Lukashenko stated that the Belarusian army, numbering some 35,000–40,000 troops, would not be able to assist Russia in its operations in Ukraine but that Belarus was participating in the war in other ways. Earlier, supporting the Kremlin's narrative, he urged President Volodymyr Zelensky to resume talks with Moscow if he wanted to avoid massive casualties and the country's complete destruction.

On 21 November, the Ukrainian border service noted the presence of radio-electronic warfare units on the Belarusian side of the border, whose primary purpose is to prevent Ukrainian forces from carrying out reconnaissance activities in the border region. Drones are being interfered with, which are 'often remotely intercepted by Belarusian forces'. It was recalled that the expansion of engineering barrages and minefields is underway to make it difficult for Russian troops to launch a renewed attack. At the same time, Kyiv announced that there were insufficient forces on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border to carry out an offensive. More than 9,000 Russian troops are supposed to be in Belarus, and around 10,000–15,000 Belarusians serving in the army and the so-called 'force sector' are ready to participate in a 'special operation'. The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces also warned that Russian special services were preparing provocations – under the guise of terrorist attacks, Belarusian critical infrastructure facilities, including those of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant, could be destroyed.

On 22 November, officers of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the police, as well as soldiers of the National Guard, entered the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and the Korets Holy Trinity Convent and the headquarters of the Sarny Eparchy (Rivne Oblast). The conduct of counter-

intelligence activities justified the intervention to counter the diversionary activities of Russian special services. According to the SBU's assessment, facilities belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate could be used to harbour sabotage and reconnaissance groups and store weapons. A day later, the SBU reported the results of searches in 350 church buildings – many pro-Russian publications and funds (2 million hryvnias, over \$100,000 and several thousand roubles) were found there. The identities of 850 people were established, of whom more than 50 were tested on a polygraph. Some of those checked had forged Ukrainian identity documents or Russian passports.

Commentary

- The 23 November attack on Ukraine's energy infrastructure was the first to render the country's electricity supply system essentially non-functional. All four nuclear power plants were periodically out of service for the first time in history. Russian shelling in recent weeks has strained the Ukrainian grid to such an extent that flashy but only makeshift repairs cannot restore its stability and complete controllability. Thus, in the absence of the possibility of replacing damaged or destroyed facilities, each successive attack will result in a blackout lasting from a few hours to a few days over large areas of the country, and the aggressor will be able to achieve this effect using fewer and fewer missiles.
- The Kremlin's subsequent statement already has the character of brutal blackmail. According to this message, the lack of electricity and heat in many areas of Ukraine resulted from Kyiv refusing to negotiate with Moscow. This confirms that the current tactics of the invading forces are designed to bring about a humanitarian disaster and that the 'peace offers' are essentially ultimatums designed to force unconditional surrender on the authorities of the invaded country. The Kremlin is counting on the fact that paralysing the supply of electricity, water, and heating will break the Ukrainian social resistance, forcing Zelensky to enter into talks with the Kremlin under the pretext of limiting the devastation of the state and improving the livelihood of the population. However, the actions of the Russians do not provoke a change in Kyiv's position – the authorities are focused on maintaining their ability to survive the winter period. In doing so, they are considering evacuating the population from major cities. For the time being, there are also no signs of social ferment.
- Despite the relatively high total number of airstrikes reported by the Ukrainians, a deterioration in the effectiveness of air defences in the capital area can be observed. In previous attacks, it allowed single rockets to pass through, with a claimed effectiveness of over 80% (on 15 November, it was supposed to shoot down nearly 87% of enemy rockets). In the latest attack, this dropped to less than 67%. It remains an open question to what extent this is a result of the development of new tactics by the Russians (firing missiles from a closer distance, which gives defenders less time to react), the effectiveness of which can be seen in the near-frontline areas (Ukrainian air defence is said to shoot down on average 40% of enemy missiles there, and on 17 November its effectiveness was less than 15%), and to what extent the depletion of Ukrainian stocks of anti-missiles and the destruction of air defence systems by the aggressor there. It should be noted that the Kyiv area is defended by Western NASAMS and IRIS-T systems, whose effectiveness is estimated by the Ukrainian side at 100%.