

Ukraine prepares for a blackout. 277th day of the war

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski

Adverse weather conditions led to a slowdown in the pace of fighting. In the Donetsk Oblast, however, Russian forces renewed attacks south and east of Bakhmut, east of Siversk and in an arc west of Donetsk. In Luhansk Oblast, both sides attempted to push, with Svatove and Kreminna remaining the main directions of operations. Ukrainian forces were also said to be attempting diversions on the left bank of the Dnieper in Kherson Oblast, Kinburn Spit and Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

The Russians continued to launch rocket attacks on infrastructure in towns on the immediate frontline. Targets included Dnipro, Kryvyi Rih, the outskirts of Zaporizhzhia, as well as Kupiansk and Chuhuiv and Kramatorsk and Lyman. Under permanent Russian artillery fire are Kherson and its surroundings, the positions and hinterland of Ukrainian troops along the entire line of contact and in the areas bordering Russia. The defenders' artillery is limited to shelling enemy positions and hinterland in the main combat areas. Communiqués from the Ukrainian General Staff indicate that air activity has decreased on both sides.

The Air Force Command has reported the threat of another massive missile attack, which is expected this week. Command spokesman Yuriy Ihnat once again called for transferring combat aircraft and air defence systems to Ukraine. He also notified that Ukrainian airspace is currently defended by two batteries of US NASAMS systems and one launcher of German IRIS-Ts (it was previously reported that an entire battery of this type had been transferred to Ukraine), for which ammunition is needed. To accusations that the Hawk systems currently supplied from the West are obsolete, he countered that the basis of Ukraine's air defence continues to be the equally age-old post-Soviet S-300 and Buk-M1, which, unlike Western systems, have not even been modernised.

According to the Ukrainian energy operator Ukrenerho, since November 27, almost 80% of energy demand has been covered by electricity producers, of which about 10% is being used by critical infrastructure. Remaining electric power guarantees the supply of electricity for consumers. Ukrenerho has introduced consumption limits for each Ukrainian oblast, which cannot be exceeded, and the local system operator must independently determine the types of outages – emergency or scheduled – and apply them directly (e.g. in the Lviv Oblast, 50% of consumers can use electricity and water at the same time). On 28 November, Ukrenerho reported that the power deficit had increased to 27% (from 20% the previous day), and emergency shutdowns were being implemented across Ukraine (only 30% of users had access to electricity in the Volyn Oblast). The main reason for the increase in the deficit is the deterioration of the weather and the drop in temperature.

The energy crisis has revealed problems in efficiently preparing reserve supply points for the population. On 25 November, President Volodymyr Zelensky accused the authorities of major cities, and Kyiv in particular, of neglecting to efficiently set up the so-called 'steadfastness points' to provide civilians with access to electricity, water and the internet. He stressed that such points usually operate only at the State Emergency Service of Ukraine's facilities and the capital's railway station. He demanded that Kyiv mayor Vitaly Klitschko improve the quality of his work and accused him of falsifying reports on the implementation of the task. As a result of the inspection, 106 of the 530 'steadfastness points' set up so far were closed. The main reason for this was equipment shortages, mainly generators and access to a water intake. A day later, the head of the Servant of the Nation parliamentary faction, Davyd Arakhamia, relayed that the authorities in Kyiv had seven days to rectify the defects, after which a new joint inspection would take place.

On 26 November, the British Ministry of Defence reported that the Russian army was using cruise missiles initially designed to carry nuclear warheads for attacks in Ukraine. The claim was supported by an analysis of the remains of Russia's Ch-55 aircraft-launched missile, which was developed in the 1980s solely as a nuclear weapon delivery system. According to the British, the warhead is likely to have been replaced by ballast, and the fall of the missile still causes damage due to kinetic energy and the explosion of unused fuel. They do not rule out the possibility that Russian forces are using these missiles as dummy targets designed to distract Ukrainian air defences and thus save depleting missile stocks.

On 25 November, Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR) assured that there would be no attack from Belarusian territory shortly. The communiqué was a reaction to disinformation content appearing on social networks about alleged plans for the entry of a Belarusian-Russian strike group as early as the end of November. According to the HUR, the disinformation operation aims to provoke Ukraine into redeploying a significant part of its forces to the border with Belarus, thereby weakening its offensive potential in the east and south of the country. On 27 November, the Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Russians intended to move some of the troops currently training in Belarus to the occupied areas. According to Ukrainian assessments, units of Belarusian special forces, part of the Belarus-Russia Regional Military Grouping, are involved in strengthening a section of the state border with Ukraine.

Norway has provided the Ukrainian army with an additional M109 self-propelled howitzer and 20,000 spare parts for howitzers of this type, and 55,000 sets of winter uniforms. From Germany, the Ukrainians received 10 M1070 Oshkosh tank transporter tractor units and 53 cars for the border service. The Belgian government approved a new military aid package under which Ukraine receives ten underwater reconnaissance drones and two mobile contamination reconnaissance laboratories. The British announced they had prepared 10 Ukrainian Sea King helicopter crews – three shifts for each of the three helicopters scheduled for transfer and one reserve crew.

The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) is continuing a counterintelligence operation revealing links between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) and Russian special services. On 25 November, church facilities of the Chernivtsi-Bukovina eparchy were searched. Documents confirming the Russian citizenship of the hierarchs, instructions for holding services and pro-Kremlin propaganda materials were questioned. As

a result of the investigative activities, it was established that the 'Moscow curators' had set themselves the task of misinforming the faithful about the socio-political situation in Ukraine and the situation on the frontline. The SBU opened a criminal investigation for treason. On 27 November, the SBU entered the buildings of the UOC-MP eparchy in Ivano-Frankivsk, arguing that the action was carried out to verify reports that church facilities were being used to shelter Russian citizens and store prohibited items.

On 25 November, the Russian president signed a decree obliging the Ministry of Digital Development, the Federal Tax Service and the Ministry of Defence to create a state information resource with citizens' data necessary for 'updating military registration'. According to the document, such a resource must be created by 1 April 2024, and the IT work to digitise the information held to date is to be completed by 30 December 2022. Data on the Foreign Intelligence Service officers and the Federal Security Service will be excluded from the resource. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, a new wave of mobilisation is being prepared in Russia, which is expected to start on 10 December this year.

Commentary

- Statements made by representatives of the Ukrainian government and army, as well as measures taken to secure energy supplies, show that Kyiv regards another massive missile attack and the blackout expected as a result as the most serious threat and challenge to state stability at the moment. Appeals to the West, on whose help both the functioning of Ukraine's air defence system and the maintenance of the necessary energy supply capabilities depend, are no longer – as was the case in previous months – of a demanding nature. As a symbol of the change in attitude, the spokesman for the Air Force Command emphasised that even the worn-out Western air defence systems (apart from the 1960s Hawk systems, which Spain and other Alliance countries intend to donate, the Ukrainian army is also to receive the French Crotale systems, which have already been withdrawn from service) are an improvement on the post-Soviet equipment of the Ukrainian army. Kyiv is most likely fully aware that without the goodwill and support of the West, stopping Russian attacks and preparing the Ukrainian state and society to survive the winter will not be possible.
- The SBU's counterintelligence operation, which has been ongoing for several days, and the revelation of examples of cooperation between the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian secret services, are expected to cause internal divisions within the Orthodox hierarchy. Fearing for their safety and loss of property, a section of it may opt to limit its support for Russia. The Ukrainian authorities have long been aware of the Russians' use of church structures for disinformation and intelligence activities. In March 2022, two bills to outlaw the UOC-MP and allow for the confiscation of its assets were submitted to parliament. Work on these pieces of legislation has been suspended and parliament is expected to return to them once the war is over. However, it cannot be ruled out that the SBU operation may result in administrative decisions allowing the outlawing of the most pro-Russian Orthodox centres (e.g. the need to re-register parishes). Proving the hostile activities of the UOC-MP may also result in an exodus of believers to the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).