

One Russian-Belarusian army. 284th day of the war

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On 3 December in Minsk, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Belarusian Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin signed a protocol correcting the content of the 1997 Russian-Belarusian agreement on jointly ensuring regional security in the military sphere. The most significant changes include legalising the Russian military presence in Belarus under the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) banner and granting the right to use local military infrastructure. Current issues of military-technical cooperation were also discussed, as indicated by the participation of the head of the Belarusian arms industry sector, Dmitry Pantus, in the talks. Shoigu stressed that allied relations have taken on particular importance in the face of 'unprecedented pressure from the West, which is waging an unspeakable war against the Union State'. At the same time, he recalled that combat coordination of military units assigned to the RGF was underway in Belarus. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, in turn, stressed that Belarus and Russia have one army that is preparing to repel aggression and that shortly, in agreement with Putin, 'a common position will be worked out on further measures to protect our territorial integrity'.

Referring to the situation in Belarus, the commander of the Combined Armed Forces of Ukraine, Serhiy Nayev, said that the Russian-Belarusian RGF was still being developed but that, for the time being, there was no military threat from Belarus. He assured that, should it increase, reinforcement of the Northern Operational Zone with additional forces and resources is envisaged.

The Russians are continuing attacks to the northeast and south of Bakhmut, which has become their main target in recent days. Fighting continues east of Siversk and west of Donetsk, where Ukrainian forces repelled further attempts at a Russian assault. Both sides attacked north of Kreminna without success. According to some sources, Ukrainian units were to renew attacks on the border of the Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts, as well as efforts to retake lost positions south of Bakhmut and south of Vuhledar.

New Russian rocket attacks on Dnipro, Kramatorsk, Kryvyi Rih and Zaporizhzhia led to further destruction in their industrial areas. Russian artillery and aviation continued to strike Ukrainian army positions and facilities along the contact lines and border areas. Kherson and Nikopol remain under permanent fire. Targets of Ukrainian strikes included the hinterland of Russian forces in Donetsk.

Spain handed over the first Hawk air defence missile set to Ukraine, while Lithuania handed over another two refurbished PzH 2000 howitzers (the first two underwent repairs between September and October). In total, Lithuania pledged to repair 12 of the 14 Panzerhaubitzen supplied to Ukraine by Germany (the Ukrainian army received another 14 vehicles of this

type from the Netherlands and Italy). Estonia handed over a third Role 2 field hospital with equipment as part of a project funded by Norway (it also co-financed the delivery of the previous two hospitals) and the Netherlands (€7.8 million in total). The first shift of Ukrainian soldiers began training at the Libavá training ground in the Czech Republic.

On 3 December, Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR) reported that Russian forces were using missiles received directly from the assembly line for missile attacks. Compared to the pre-war period, Russian arms industry plants can still produce a sufficient number of cruise missiles despite a decline in production. It was noted that Russia has been importing 122 mm and 152 mm calibre artillery ammunition for the past two months from Belarus. Moscow is also negotiating with other countries, including Iran, to receive ammunition for the Smerch and Uragan rocket artillery systems.

Due to power cuts, the situation of the population in Kyiv is deteriorating. On 2 December, the mayor of the capital, Vitali Klitschko, declared that in the event of a total power cut, metro services would be halted, and 45 underground rail stations would act as temporary shelters. Entrance to the platforms will be free, but one must carry an identity card. Internet connections, electricity, drinking water and medical supplies will be available at the stations. Klitschko pointed out that the average temperature in these places is around 12–14 degrees Celsius, which requires taking care of warm clothing. He also declared that free city bus transport would be maintained if the capital ran out of electricity. On 4 December, Kyiv's city council announced that an electricity shortage would force the need to drain the central heating system to prevent it from freezing in the pipes. The list of shops that will operate even in the event of a complete power shortage is being updated.

Commentary

- The Russian defence minister's visit to Minsk confirmed that Lukashenka is increasingly losing influence in shaping relations with Moscow in the military sphere. Legalising the stay of Russian troops in Belarus means that their presence will be permanent, and the local military infrastructure will act as informal Russian military bases. Lukashenka's use of the phrase 'joint army' confirms that the Russian General Staff will have the decisive voice in the military planning dimension.
- The possible use of Belarusian forces to attack Ukraine remains an open question. Lukashenka is trying to avoid this, as he is aware that it will affect public sentiment. In an attempt to justify the need to keep the army on high alert and the presence of Russian forces in Belarus, he has adopted the Kremlin-imposed viewpoint of a growing NATO threat and an 'unspeakable war' with the Union State. Moscow's chosen tactics indicate that Belarusian-Russian forces are expected to continue to tie down the Ukrainian army in the north of the country, which does not exclude the possibility of engaging Belarusian forces in diversionary actions in the border region. An increase in the use of Belarusian arms companies to produce for the Russian army (including artillery ammunition) can be expected.
- After the Ukrainian army took over some industrial facilities in the large frontier towns (mainly storage space), they became a regular target for Russian attacks. By striking at existing and potential armament depots and subunit centralisation sites, the aggressor is attempting to limit the Ukrainians' current activity and counter potential preparations for

another offensive. It remains an open question why the Russians have not yet decided to destroy the bridges at Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia to disrupt Ukrainian logistics. Of a different nature is the constant shelling of the Kherson and Nikopol areas, as well as – relatively frequent in recent weeks – the coastal part of the Ochakiv area and the adjacent water area. In this way, Russian forces are attempting to stop potential defenders' preparations to become active on the left bank of the Dnieper and Kinburn Spit and to counter the movement of Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups into the occupied territories.