

Russia retrofits forces in Belarus. 298th day of the war

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On 18–19 December, the Russians launched a kamikaze drone attack on Kyiv, damaging energy infrastructure in two areas of the city. Its defenders reported that 18 of the 23 Shahed-136/131 drones attacking the capital had been shot down. According to the Air Force Command, the Ukrainians were expected to neutralise 30 of the 35 drones that attacked targets in the south of the country in addition to Kyiv. In addition, Ukraine is still dealing with the effects of the 16 December missile attack. According to electricity system operator Ukrenerho, emergency power cuts occur in the capital and ten oblasts.

The aggressor's artillery and air force continue to attack positions and facilities of Ukrainian forces along the line of contact and in areas bordering Russia. Rockets have also fallen on Kramatorsk and Lyman. Kherson (the city is without electricity) and the areas around Nikopol and Ochakiv are still under permanent fire. On 18 December, there was a seven-hour shelling of Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Ukrainian artillery targeted enemy positions and facilities in the main combat areas and Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Another act of diversion in the Russian Belgorod is also likely to have taken place.

Clashes are ongoing for Bakhmut, where defenders are succeeding in holding off an enemy advance in the city's eastern part. According to unofficial sources, they were also to regain some of their lost positions. Heavy fighting is taking place over Soledar to the northeast of Bakhmut, and Pidhorodne and Klishchiivka, which lie on its north-eastern and south-western outskirts. Marinka west to Donetsk is also the arena of fierce skirmishes. The Russians were said to be unsuccessfully attacking north, east and south of Siversk and on the border of Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts. According to local reports, they are also to reinforce defensive positions in the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Oblast and increase troop numbers in the Melitopol area. The city is prepared for defence and potential street fighting.

Russia continues to reinforce the grouping in Belarus, in the Brest and Gomel oblasts bordering Ukraine. Additional transport columns (at least 50 trucks) and 18 medical buses were due to arrive there in recent days. The electronic warfare subunits of the Belarusian army received new equipment (at least six specialised vehicles) from their neighbour.

On 16 December, Alyaksandr Lukashenka held a meeting with government members concerning Vladimir Putin's planned visit to Minsk on 19 December. It concerned Belarusian-Russian relations. According to Lukashenka, the talks with Putin will focus on economic issues. At the same time, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence announced that Defence Ministers Viktor Khrenin and Sergei Shoigu would attend the presidents' meeting. Kyiv is keeping a close eye on military cooperation between the two countries – a meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky on 18 December was devoted to this issue. Restrained

assessments prevail concerning the possibility of launching an attack from Belarus in the near future, but this threat is not completely ruled out in the long term.

The British Ministry of Defence has confirmed the delivery of Brimstone 2 missiles that destroy armoured targets to Ukraine. The government in London has also tentatively announced the transfer of several hundred thousand artillery shells to Kyiv next year, with an indicative value of £250 million. The Pentagon, in turn, admitted that it was sourcing and sending spare parts for S-300 systems to Ukraine.

Deputy head of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Gen. Vadym Skibitsky, confirmed in an interview with *Bild* that the army is carrying out a wide range of operations on enemy territory. The targets of the attacks are military facilities – primarily sites from which attacks are launched towards Ukraine, warehouses and repair bases, command posts and barracks with more troops.

Commentary

- Russia continues to retrofit forces in Belarus, but this scale is still too small to speak of building a new offensive grouping. However, the strengthening of logistics and, in particular, of medical security allow us to assume that the invaders do not rule out carrying out actions on a smaller scale or want to create the appearance of readiness to undertake such actions in order to tie up part of the opponent's forces in the north of the country. A similar approach should be taken to raising the combat readiness of the Belarusian army, which – among other things due to its low potential and the low level of motivation of its soldiers – would not constitute a significant reinforcement of the aggressor's forces in the event of a new offensive from the north. The possible participation of the Belarusian Armed Forces in operations on Ukrainian territory would be primarily of political and psychological significance.