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Leopards and Abrams for Ukraine. Day 336 of the war

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On 25 January, the German government announced that it intended to provide Kyiv with a company of 14 Leopard-2A6 tanks from the Bundeswehr's reserves, along with a package of logistics and ammunition, and had agreed to its other allies donating Leopard-2 tanks to the Ukrainian army. At the same time, it announced that it intends to coordinate the donor countries' efforts to equip two Ukrainian battalions with these tanks (depending on the sources, Ukraine will receive a total of between 80 and 88 Leopard-2 tanks). Ukrainian crews are to begin training in February in Germany; according to that country's defence minister, the German tanks are to arrive in Ukraine by the end of April. A day earlier, Poland officially requested Berlin's consent to donate 14 Leopard-2A4 tanks to the Ukrainian army. The German government's decision to hand over the Leopards came after the Biden administration approved the delivery of 31 M1 Abrams tanks to Kyiv.

The Netherlands is one country which is ready to hand over 18 Leopard-2A6M tanks within the framework of the joint project; however before they can do so, they will have to buy them from Germany, as so far they have just been leasing them. Another is Portugal, which will provide four Leopard-2A6PO tanks, although Lisbon says it will take two to three months to prepare them and train the Ukrainian crews. Spain and Norway have also announced that they will transfer Leopard-2 tanks to Ukraine. Madrid had already declared that it could send 10 Leopard-2A4 tanks back in 2022, but now the Spanish media have reported that the government is ready to deliver 12 tanks, and could ultimately even transfer all 53 of the Leopard-2A4s it has in storage (although only 20 of them are considered operational). After the necessary overhaul, the first tanks would be ready for shipment within two months. Meanwhile the Norwegian press has reported plans to hand over eight Leopard-2A4NO tanks. For its part Finland, which has officially announced it will participate in the joint creation of two battalions, has not yet specified whether it will donate tanks or participate in the project in some other form (such as offering training or maintenance).

Denmark and Canada are considering donating Leopard-2 tanks; media outlets estimate that six Danish tanks and between four and ten Canadian tanks could be involved. Sweden, on the other hand, has not ruled out supplying its version of Leopard-2A5 (Stridsvagn-122) tanks at a later date. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, which came out as potential donors in recent weeks, have now ruled out this option; they have now said that they will receive one company each of Leopard-2A4 tanks from Germany (14 and 15 units respectively) in exchange for the much larger number of T-72 tanks (the Czechs) and BVP-1 infantry fighting vehicles (Slovakia) which have been donated to Ukraine. So far, Bratislava and Prague have taken delivery of one Leopard each, with deliveries expected to continue until the end of

2023. The Slovak defence minister Jaroslav Naď has declared his country's willingness to hand over the remaining T-72 tanks to Kyiv in exchange for more Leopards or other Western tanks.

On 25 January, US President Joe Biden announced the delivery to Ukraine of a battalion set of 31 M1 Abrams tanks (according to US media, this is the M1A1 version). The $400 million package (funded by the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative program, approved by the US Congress) also includes 120-mm tank ammunition, eight M88 armoured recovery vehicles, support vehicles and technical maintenance. The crews are expected to begin training in the coming weeks, although the time required to complete the whole process of preparing and handing over the tanks is estimated at several months.

The head of France's defence ministry Sébastien Lecornu has announced that the first AMX-10RC armoured reconnaissance vehicles (so-called wheeled tanks) will arrive in Ukraine in February; the total number has still not been disclosed. On the other hand, Ukrainian military intelligence has reported that Turkey has handed over two Bayraktar TB2 unmanned reconnaissance-combat aerial vehicles free of charge.

The main areas of fighting are still Bakhmut and the towns to the north (along the road to Siversk) and southwest of it, where the defenders are trying to prevent the last supply lines from being cut. According to a spokesman for the Ukrainian General Staff, they still control Bakhmut and have no intention of retreating. Russian forces are said to be pushing up unsuccessfully against the Ukrainian positions south and east of Siversk and between it and Kreminna, as well as north of Avdiivka, and between Avdiivka and Donetsk. The Ukrainians are also still defending themselves in Marinka. The Russians have managed to break through the first line of Ukrainian defences south of Vuhledar, and are advancing to the southern and eastern outskirts of the town, where fighting is ongoing. In the Zaporizhzhia oblast, the attackers' units were supposed to strike toward the road connecting Orikhiv and Huliaipole, but were held back south of it at Charivne. According to Russian sources, Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups have been making attempts to push up along the Dnieper near Nova Kakhovka, and are operating on the border of Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts.

On the night of 26 January, the Russians struck at targets throughout Ukraine using 24 Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones. According to Ukrainian data, all of them were shot down, including 15 in the Kyiv area. The next morning, the aggressor launched another attack on Ukrainian energy infrastructure (this time 30 rockets were used). By noon Kyiv time, strikes had been confirmed in two areas of the capital, as well as in the Odesa (where two facilities were damaged), Vinnytsia and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. During this period, no reports were received from the Lviv and Zhytomyr oblasts, where some of the cruise missiles had been targeted. Missile attacks also took place in previous days, the targets including Kramatorsk (twice), Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro cities.

Russian artillery and aviation are still attacking Ukrainian forces' positions and facilities along the line of contact and in border areas, where, after a break of several days, the intensity of shelling in Chernihiv oblast increased, and Sumy oblast was hit by a record 187 strikes. The amount of shelling in Kherson has dropped to around ten strikes daily. Other towns in the right-bank part of Kherson oblast are also under constant attack (on 25 January, Beryslav was the target of massive shelling), as are the Nikopolskyi raion and the

area around Ochakiv. On 24 January, a Ukrainian act of sabotage was said to have occurred in Mariupol; the target was a barracks used by the squadron led by Ramzan Kadyrov.

On 24 January, in the wake of an increasingly high-profile scandal surrounding overpriced food purchases for the military, the Ukrainian deputy defence minister Vyacheslav Shapovalov resigned. He oversaw the logistics division, and deemed his resignation necessary after the ministry became the target of a "campaign of accusations" of embezzlement. The ministry stressed that Shapovalov was an outstanding official who, among other things, had successfully de-monopolised the supply of catering services, fuel and lubricants to the Armed Forces. A day later, the director of the procurement department, who was responsible for concluding the unfavourable food supply contracts, was also sacked. As a result of the affair, an initiative was put forward in the Ukrainian parliament to pass a law guaranteeing transparency in public procurement during the period of martial law; it was also announced that checks would be stepped up in other areas of defence procurement, such as the supply of weapons, fuels and military equipment. The National Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office said the investigation into embezzlement in the Defence Ministry's procurement of food had already begun before the scandal came to light, and the transaction under suspicion did not actually go through. The Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, came to the minister's defence. He called for a thorough investigation of the allegations, and advised against shifting responsibility for how the subordinates behaved onto their boss.

On 23 January, Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council decided that under martial law, government officials may only travel abroad for official purposes. This applies to all central and local government officials, as well as parliamentarians. Meanwhile on 25 January President Volodymyr Zelensky signed into law a bill (passed last 13 December) that increases the criminal liability for soldiers who commit crimes violating the rules of military discipline. General Zaluzhnyi announced the introduction of the amendments. The biggest controversy arose over the amendments to the Criminal Code, which introduced the principle of "excluding the possibility of imposing a lighter punishment on soldiers than provided for in the code, and disregarding the possibility of serving a suspended sentence". This means that the courts will be obliged to impose absolute prison sentences in cases involving the crimes of disobedience (from 3 to 10 years), failure to obey an order (from 3 to 7 years), the use of violence against a superior (from 5 to 10 years), desertion (from 5 to 12 years) or arbitrary desertion from the battlefield or refusal to use weapons (from 5 to 10 years). The penalties for administrative offenses related to violations of military discipline (alcohol, drug abuse) will also increase. The law has received criticism from human rights activists who have pointed out its draconian nature, which does not allow for the application of extraordinary leniency.

On 25 January, Colonel Roman Horbach, the head of the personnel department of the Land Forces Command, explained that summonses for military service can be served not only by supplementary commissions, but also by authorised officers of other services, heads of institutions, organisations or enterprises; they can be delivered at the conscript's workplace and also in his place of residence (by heads of communities or housing cooperatives). He added that refusal to accept a summons or go to a military unit will be a punishable offence; he also stated that summonses will not be sent via the Diia online application. He further

stressed that the scale of mobilisation has decreased many times compared to the beginning of the war, and that the most pressing issue right now is finding specialists to operate complex weapons systems and replenishing the front-line units.

On 25 January Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, said that the Russians are "preparing for an offensive" that could begin within the next two months. According to military intelligence, there are currently 5800 Russian troops on Belarusian territory. Until mid-January there had been about 11,000; there are fewer now because the training of those mobilised has been completed, and they have since been relocated to eastern Ukraine, including Luhansk oblast.

Commentary

- The announcements of the transfer of Leopard-2 and Abrams tanks to Ukraine represent another symbolic breakthrough – after the deliveries of the Western infantry fighting vehicles promised in early January – and the partial meeting of Kyiv's expectations. However, these deliveries will still not meet the needs of the Ukrainian army (which Ukrainian and Western military officials estimate at 300 to 500 tanks), as in recent days the allies have only pledged to deliver a total of about 100 tanks. If the media reports on the announcements by Denmark and Canada are confirmed, this number will increase by 10–15, and after taking into account the Challenger-2 tanks promised by London, the total will amount to 130. This will enable the equipment of only three battalions (two with different versions of Leopard-2 tanks, and one with Abrams) and one independent company (with Challenger-2 tanks). It will thus be necessary to prepare further tranches of armoured weapons deliveries (including armoured combat vehicles) in the coming weeks, at least as many as the amounts pledged in January.
- Despite the real strengthening of capabilities, these new tanks will pose operational, tactical and logistical challenges for the Ukrainian army. The problem is not only the diversity of types (each battalion will effectively be using a different model of tank) and battalion structures (44 Leopards in the German standard, compared to 31 Abrams in a configuration unusual for the US Army), but above all the fact that it will be difficult to coordinate their deliveries quickly, so that they can be used to develop an advantage at one time and place on the frontline. The interval between the delivery of Leopards and Abrams could be as long as a couple of months; the first battalion equipped with Western tanks may only reach operational readiness in late spring. In all likelihood, the Ukrainian command will want (or even need) to use it in combat without waiting for more subdivisions, thus depriving the defenders of the opportunity to exploit their potential numerical advantage. Another issue is the time lag between the acquisition of Western tanks and infantry fighting vehicles; nevertheless it is likely that along with the Leopards, more Marders will arrive in Ukraine, and more Bradleys together with the Abrams.
- In the context of the timing of the handover and the conditions for the Ukrainians' use of the Leopard-2 tanks, Germany's (self-proclaimed) assumption of the role of coordinator of creating the battalions equipped with them is important. This may mean some donors will have to hold off on delivering the tanks until everyone is ready. This coordination will undoubtedly guarantee the formation of compact subdivisions from the tanks being offered, and that in turn will allow them to be better used in offensive operations.

However, their operational use will also depend on how the tanks' service and repair in Germany is organised.

- The latest missile attack on Ukraine confirms that the Russians are using new tactics, as they are attempting to reduce the Ukrainian air defences' effectiveness. In the first phase of the attack, the Russians are uses relatively inexpensive drones from Iran (referred to by Ukrainians as 'mopeds'), against which missiles many times more expensive are launched from air defence systems. In addition, the defenders are thus forced to reveal their positions. As a result, the Russians' recent missile attacks are hitting more targets and using fewer missiles.
- Despite the resignation of senior Defence Ministry officials, Minister Reznikov's image has been severely damaged, and the issue of his responsibility for the lack of oversight and effective implementation of financial control mechanisms has come to the fore. Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that the services responsible for combating corruption and fraud had already dealt with the matter by preventing the suspicious contract from being implemented. The scandal at the Defence Ministry demonstrates that combating the manifestations of corruption in the state administration is a serious challenge for the President and the Ukrainian government. In turn, in a broader context, it indicates that the war has not helped to root out negative behaviour among government officials. Further steps to discipline civil servants are to be expected, as signalled by the decision to ban foreign travel.
- The introduction of provisions tightening criminal and administrative liability for those in military service shows that the Armed Forces Command is expecting a decline in military discipline. Establishing the principle of absolute imprisonment for criminal acts and excluding the possibility of leniency are efforts to deter soldiers from violating the existing regulations. Meanwhile, the announcement that the list of entities authorised to hand out summonses for military service is being expanded indicates that efforts are intensifying to replenish the frontline units' personnel as soon as possible.