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Removal of the commander of Ukrainian forces in Donbas. Day 368 of the war

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The Russians continue their advance north-west of Bakhmut, pushing the defenders towards the junction in the village of Chasiv Yar. Russian troops most likely already have full fire control of the last Bakhmut supply line running through it. Fighting is ongoing in the northern, eastern and southern parts of the town and south-west of the town, where Ukrainian forces have once again counter-attacked in an effort to prevent the enemy from taking physical control of the Bakhmut–Kostiantynivka road. The Russians were expected to resume their attacks west of Horlivka. Their pressure also continues on enemy positions south and east of Siversk, north and south of Avdiivka and in an arc west of Donetsk, where Marinka is still the region of heaviest clashes. South of Vuhledar and west of Kreminna, attacks were expected to be launched by both sides. Fighting also occurred on the border of Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts.

On the night of 27 February, the Russians carried out attacks using Shahed kamikaze drones, most of which (according to the Ukrainian General Staff: 11 out of 14) were shot down. The Russians continued to launch missile attacks behind Ukrainian forces in the part of Donetsk Oblast under their control (Druzhkivka, Kramatorsk, Lyman, Myrnohrad). Shells also fell twice on Zaporizhzhia, where infrastructure was damaged. The invading air force and artillery continued to bombard and shell areas along the contact line and near the border, with Kherson, Nikopol and Ochakiv and villages surrounding them remaining the main targets outside the combat areas.

On 26 February, President Volodymyr Zelensky dismissed the commander of the Joint Forces in Donbas, General Eduard Moskalyov, but did not appoint a successor. Moskalyov had been in command of the operation in the region since 15 March 2022, when he replaced General Oleksandr Pavlyuk in the post (the so-called Joint Forces Operation in Donbas has been running uninterruptedly since 2014).

As part of another batch of German support, the Ukrainian Army received six Biber armoured bridgelayers based on the Leopard 1 tank. Germany also plans to provide it with four additional Leopard 2A6s (Berlin has previously pledged 14). Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said that it was possible for all the partners to collect 62 Leopard 2s to equip two battalions with them. However, he indicated that it was unlikely that Germany would provide more tanks. The transfer of a further four 2A4 Leopards (in addition to the four previously announced), an armoured recovery vehicle and 5,000 155mm artillery ammunition was announced by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The dispatch of 60 PT-91 Twardy tanks in the coming days was declared by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki during a

conference with President Zelensky.

In March, Croatia is to start supplying Kyiv with 14 Mi-8 transport helicopters withdrawn from its army (12 in the Mi-8MTW-1 version and two Mi-8Ts). Seven of the machines are to be delivered by air to Poland, while an equal number will arrive by land after partial dismantling. British Defence Minister Ben Wallace has expressed his readiness to hand over British fighter jets to the Central European allies if they send post-Soviet MiG-29 and Su-24 aircraft to Ukraine (the Su-24 tactical bomber has never been used by the aviation of former USSR satellites, so Wallace probably meant Su-25 attack aircraft).

On 24 February, the Ukrainian border guard reported that some 9,000–10,000 Russian troops are on Belarusian territory, receiving training at local training grounds. It was stressed that the Russians currently do not have sufficient strike forces to invade Ukraine. It was acknowledged that the Ukrainians are having trouble developing fortifications on the border with the Russian Federation in the Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts due to constant artillery fire. The independent Belarusian media announced that the country's military exercises, which have been running continuously since last April, have been extended until 6 March. On 26 February, the Ukrainian General Staff noted that enemy forces were continuing fortification work in occupied Crimea. The arrival of a group of 150 mobilised troops in the Chelyabinsk Oblast, who were directed to engineering work, was noted.

On 26 February, the Ukrainian government confirmed that a territorial defence soldier was shot dead on the Ukrainian-Belarusian border. The circumstances of the incident are being investigated and an investigation into intentional homicide has been launched. It was stressed that the shots were not fired from the territory of Belarus. The day before, the Belarusian border committee issued a communiqué stating that no incidents involving weapons had been reported.

Also on 26 February, the deputy head of Ukrainian military intelligence, Vadym Skibitsky, stated that the Ukrainian army would be ready to launch a counter-offensive in the spring. He indicated that the specific date depends, among other things, on the supply of Western weapons. One of the strategic goals is to try to drive a wedge into the Russian front in the south – between Crimea and mainland Russia. Skibitsky did not rule out Ukraine striking at arms depots on Russian territory, especially in the Belgorod Oblast. On the same day, Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov stressed that a large-scale counter-offensive could only be carried out if Ukraine receives fighter aircraft – US F-16s, Swedish Gripens or Italian-German-British Tornados.

The revelation of fraud in the Ukrainian defence ministry resulted in legal changes to ensure transparency in military purchases. On 24 February, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a law which would use the ProZorro public procurement IT system to make the prices at which suppliers offer goods and services to the army publicly available. On 26 February, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal assessed that there was no systemic corruption in the defence ministry and that irregularities were being immediately addressed. He also stressed that the construction of anti-corruption infrastructure was reaching completion (a competition to select the director of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau should be completed soon).

On 26 February, the Belarusian military airport of Machulishchy, used by Russian forces, was allegedly attacked. Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya's cabinet representative in charge of security issues, Lieutenant-Colonel Alyaksandr Azarau, asserted that 'Belarusian partisans' were

responsible for the severe sabotage of an Ilyushin A-50U radio-electronic reconnaissance and early warning aircraft. Two drones were thought to have been used in the attack, from which explosives were dropped, and the perpetrators left the country. Tsikhanouska issued a statement expressing pride in Belarusians who are resisting the Russian occupation of their own homeland and fighting for the freedom of Ukraine. News of the attack has been confirmed exclusively by Belarusian opposition media. Vladimir Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on the incident, referring to a refutation by Belarus, which the media was not familiar with. However, there has been increased KGB activity in Belarus, residents of villages close to the airport have been asked to show identification papers, and checks on departing travellers have been tightened at border crossings. On 27 February, Alyaksandr Lukashenka convened a meeting with the secretary of the Security Council and the heads of the KGB, the Interior Ministry, the defence ministry and the State Border Committee, during which he called for the enforcement of strict discipline in the army and other uniformed services and for increased security near the state border.

Commentary

• Moskalyov's dismissal as commander of the Donbas forces came at a particularly difficult time for the defenders. The local counterattacks they undertook in the Bakhmut area did not yield significant results and the successes were not sustainable. To the north-west of the city, the Ukrainians have so far been entirely unable to stop the enemy's advance. Russian units are occupying new areas practically every day. The current direction of their operations indicates that Ukrainian forces, having retreated south of the Bakhmut-Sloviansk highway, have failed to establish a new, sufficiently strong line of defence. In the context under discussion, Moskalyov's dismissal can be seen on the one hand as demonstrating the state leadership's loss of confidence in him and, on the other, as treating him as a scapegoat should Bakhmut fall. President Zelensky leaving the post of commander of the combined forces vacant is a worrying signal in terms of the stability of the command structure and Ukrainian defence.