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Ukrainians signal their withdrawal from Bakhmut. Day 372 of the war

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski

Ukrainian forces are signalling the possibility of an evacuation from Bakhmut. The order to withdraw was to be given to a unit providing tactical aerial reconnaissance to the defenders using drones (the so-called Magyar's Birds). On the morning of 3 March, Ukrainian soldiers began blowing up crossings on the Bakhmutka River which runs north-south through the city (a railway bridge was confirmed to have been blown up). They had been pinned to the riverbank in recent days by the Russian advance in the eastern part of the city. Already the only relatively safe connection to Bakhmut is via dirt roads along a strip of about 3 km between the town of Khromove (at night the Russians destroyed the bridge connecting it to Bakhmut with a rocket) on the western outskirts of the town and Ivanivske, a village located south-west of Bakhmut. Fighting for control of these places is underway. Russian forces developed an assault in a north-westerly direction along the M03 highway linking Bakhmut with Sloviansk, and also advanced to the north-eastern outskirts of Chasiv Yar, through which traffic to Bakhmut runs. The Russians also renewed attacks on Chasiv Yar from the south and, in order to extend their base of departure westwards, from the Donets-Donbas Canal towards Kostiantynivka.

On 28 February and 3 March, commenting on the situation in the Bakhmut area, Deputy Defence Minister Hanna Maliar said that due to the huge losses in the mercenary units of the Wagner forces, soldiers of the regular Russian army were forced to replace them on the battlefield. She acknowledged that the military situation in the region is "tense and complicated". The enemy is outnumbered, but the losses of the invaders are expected to be much higher than those of the defenders. She stressed that the decision to continue fighting in the Bakhmut region is military and not political. She reiterated that the dissemination of information that the town was of no strategic importance and that its fierce defence was a political decision by Kyiv was part of a Russian operation to disrupt arms supplies to Ukraine.

Russian forces intensified their operations around Avdiivka and attacked Ukrainian positions north and west of the city. They have also renewed their attempts to advance in an arc west of Donetsk, where their main objective remains to drive defenders out of the western part of Marinka, as well as south and east of Siversk and west of Kreminna. The situation at the border between Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts remains unclear. According to some sources, Russian forces are said to be pushing the defenders towards Kupiansk, and that fighting is taking place in villages on the northeastern outskirts of the city. According to the Ukrainian assessment, the heaviest fighting took place on 1 March. On that day, the

Russians launched more than 170 attacks – twice as many as on 28 February and 2 March.

On 28 February, the Russians launched a pinpoint attack using a variety of missiles against Ukrainian energy infrastructure in the Poltava and Sumy oblasts. On 2 March, a residential building was destroyed in a rocket strike on Zaporizhzhia (at least five people were killed). Russian rockets mainly struck the Ukrainian army's rear in the part of Donetsk Oblast under its control (Chasiv Yar, Druzhkivka, Kramatorsk) and where there are clashes in Kharkiv Oblast (Kupiansk). Russia's artillery and aviation continue to strike and bombard along the entire line of contact, and outside the combat areas of Kharkiv, Nikopol and Ochakiv, and the areas surrounding them remain constant targets. The Russian side reported that Ukrainian drone attacks on Russia's border oblasts, as well as on facilities in Krasnodar Krai (Yeysk airport) and occupied Crimea (towns in the western and southern parts of the peninsula) intensified in late February and early March.

On 3 March, Washington is expected to announce a new $400 million military support package for Ukraine. It will include mainly ammunition, including GMLRS guided missiles for HIMARS launchers, rounds to arm Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and the accompanying bridges. The CEO of Germany's Rheinmetall confirmed a $212m contract to supply the Ukrainian army with two Skynex short-range anti-aircraft artillery systems. They are to be delivered within a year. Rheinmetall, in cooperation with Estonian company DefSecIntel, was also due to start supplying Kyiv with SurveilSPIRE towed platform automated reconnaissance systems. After a 35-year hiatus, production of 122mm ammunition for the Ukrainian army resumed at Bulgaria's Terem plant in Kostenets. In order to supply Ukraine, Bulgaria's largest ammunition producer VMZ (Vazovski Mashinostroitelni Zavodi) in the city of Sopot in turn planned to extend the working week to six days.

On 28 February, during an appearance before the US Congress, Undersecretary of Defence Colin Kahl stated that fighter aircraft, although a priority for Ukraine, were 'not in the top three priorities' in America's assessment (as these air defence systems, artillery and armoured weapons). The old US F-16s would not be available to Ukraine until a year and a half at the earliest (while the new ones would be available within three to six years), and the transfer of even 36 aircraft would cost $2–3bn, which would come at the cost of urgently needed ammunition for the Ukrainian army. The Pentagon deputy spokesman also disagreed with Kyiv's proposal to transfer 128 aircraft. He reported that, according to the US Air Force's assessment, Ukraine would need 50–80 aircraft in the long term. In addition, according to Kahl, it "does not make sense" to start training Ukrainian pilots in the operation of F-16s when they may receive other aircraft – Tornados, Gripens and Mirages. On 2 March, the head of the French defence ministry, Sébastien Lecornu, communicated that Paris was still considering starting training in the use of Mirage 2000 aircraft and transferring them to Kyiv. The following day, in an interview with the German daily Bild, Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov announced that Ukraine would receive two to three types of aircraft from the West.

The head of Ukraine's Security Service, Vasyl Malyuk, stated on 28 February that 360 Russian secret service agents had been unmasked since the start of the invasion. He admitted that for decades Russia had placed its agents in state bodies, the Orthodox Church and the military-industrial complex. He added that the SBU has opened more than 64,000 criminal proceedings related to the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, of which

more than 24,000 relate to violations by Russian forces of the laws and customs of war. According to Malyuk, the Russians carry out at least ten cyber attacks on critical infrastructure facilities or government offices per day (more than 4,500 have been recorded since February last year.

On 28 February, Vladimir Putin attended a college of the Federal Security Service (FSB). He stressed that FSB structures are directly involved in a special military operation, carrying out 'non-standard operational tasks' behind enemy lines, and that they will continue to provide assistance to the Armed Forces and National Guard of the Russian Federation over the next few months, including providing them with information of operational importance. The next major task will be to strengthen operational capabilities for gaining "the trust of the people of Donbas and Novorossiya" and to maintain increased control of the state border with Ukraine. The FSB Border Service, supported by aviation and the Armed Forces and National Guard, is to create a barrier to prevent sabotage groups from penetrating Russian territory. According to Putin, it is necessary to strengthen the work of counterintelligence due to the considerable activity of Western secret services. He also ordered the provision of airtight protection against the leakage of information on military structures and security bodies, defence industry enterprises and the technologies used, as well as the supply of armaments and equipment to the army. Putin pointed out that terrorist and extremist crimes had increased over the past year, which he linked to the West's drive to revive illegal structures designed to destabilise Russia.

On 2 March, the governor of the Russian Federation's Bryansk Oblast reported that an attack by a sabotage group had taken place in the area of the village of Lubechane, which lies on the border with Ukraine, leaving two civilians dead and an 11-year-old boy wounded when a passenger car was fired on. Putin described the incident as a "terrorist attack" carried out by "neo-Nazis", and the FSB took action to "destroy armed Ukrainian radicals". It was soon reported that the saboteurs had been 'pushed back' to Ukraine and artillery fired there. In response, Mykhailo Podolyak, adviser to the head of the Ukrainian President's Office, stated that the story about Ukrainian saboteurs was a classic and deliberate act of incitement, and that the Russian government wanted to keep its own people in fear and justify the continuation of the war. In doing so, he suggested that 'Russian guerrilla' activity was on the rise. In a similar vein, the Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, Oleksiy Danilov, commented on the incident, announcing that a movement of 'Russian anti-fascist militias' was developing in the Russian Federation. Following his statement, the Russian Volunteer Corps fighting on the Ukrainian side took responsibility for the attack. According to their version of events, 45 volunteers allegedly attacked two infantry fighting vehicles and wounded a Russian border guard. These reports were confirmed by a representative of Ukrainian military intelligence, Andriy Yusov, who indicated that it was "free Russians" with weapons in their hands fighting against the regime.

On 1 March, Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleh Nikolenko warned of a Russian disinformation campaign regarding Ukraine's alleged preparations for acts of incitement involving fissile materials near the border with Transnistria. This message, with the support of the Russian propaganda apparatus, was previously spread by Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova.

Commentary

- The situation of Bakhmut's defenders is becoming increasingly difficult. In all likelihood, they have already exhausted the forces that were allowing them to continue to launch local counter-attacks at the end of February. Concentrating solely on defence, they are being systematically pushed back by Russian troops into subsequent positions. With Bakhmut's last supply route physically cut off (by the destruction of a bridge), not only the delivery of supplies, but also evacuation from the town is becoming problematic. In addition, movement along local dirt roads is hampered by the weather situation (snowmelt). The destruction of bridges and the withdrawal of the unit providing aerial reconnaissance signals that the decision to evacuate has de facto already been made (the withdrawal of heavy weaponry from Bakhmut had already begun in February). Nevertheless, it must be assumed that the Ukrainian command still allows or even assumes, as can be inferred from the statements of Deputy Defence Minister Hanna Maliar, that it will be possible to hold the city. The only way, however, is to carry out an effective counter-attack in the next few dozen hours. This is because prolonging the defence while delaying the attempt to break the blockade may result in complete encirclement and, consequently, the inability to withdraw Bakhmut's last defenders.
- The circumstances of the armed incident in the Bryansk Oblast remain unclear. It occurred two days after Putin's speech at an FSB college devoted, among other things, to protecting the border from hostile sabotage groups. This may indicate that the 'successful' anti-sabotage operation was plotted by the Russian counterintelligence special service to demonstrate its own effectiveness. The swift reaction of Putin, who had not previously commented on attacks carried out on Russian territory, may indicate that he is keen to maintain a climate of threat from 'neo-Nazis' in order to justify the need to carry out the aggression against Ukraine. In turn, the reaction of the Ukrainian side, which promotes the thesis of the growing activity of anti-Putin 'guerrillas', is an attempt to disrupt the Russian message and build a narrative of a weakening regime. It is also intended to undermine the FSB's version of the 'terrorist' nature of the incident, as Russian volunteers were said to have attacked regular soldiers, not civilians.