

## Lukashenka's threats. Day 377 of the war

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Russian forces have pushed the rest of the defenders out of the eastern part of Bakhmut and have established a line of contact on the Bakhmutka River. They also control the only undestroyed bridge in the southern part of the city. Fighting continues in the northern and southern parts of Bakhmut and on its south-western outskirts. Ukrainian troops are holding back the enemy's advance towards Chasiv Yar and on both sides of the M03 highway to Sloviansk. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, particularly intense fighting is taking place to the south of it – in the area of Dubovo-Vasylivka (the Russians are thought to have launched 37 attacks there on 6 March) and Orikhovo-Vasylivka (30 attacks on 7 March).

Russian units continue to press on Ukrainian positions south and east of Siversk and north and west of Avdiivka, but are not committing forces which would indicate an intention to encircle Avdiivka soon. In the arc to the west of Donetsk, the heaviest fighting is taking place in the Marinka area (according to Ukrainian data, 20 enemy attacks took place there on 7 March), with the Russians intensifying operations to the south of it. Ukrainian forces were expected to repel further attack attempts on the border of Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts and north-east of Kupiansk. In total, Russian forces are believed to have launched more than 140 attacks on 6 March and 100 attacks on 7 March.

Russian rocket attacks were limited to the rear of Ukrainian forces in the north-west of Donetsk Oblast. Russia's artillery and aviation continued shelling and bombing along the contact lines and in the border areas. The frequency of enemy attacks in the Mykolaiv (Ochakiv Raion) and Dnipropetrovsk (Nikopol Raion) oblasts has decreased, while Kherson and the right-bank part of Kherson Oblast remain under constant shelling. An act of Ukrainian sabotage was alleged to have occurred in occupied Berdyansk.

On 7 March, Alyaksandr Lukashenka announced that Belarusian special services had detained a 'terrorist' and his accomplices responsible for a drone attack on a Russian A-50 early warning aircraft stationed at Machulishchy airport (the incident took place on the night of 26–27 February). He admitted that the aircraft had been slightly damaged and flown back to Russia for repairs. The operation is thought to have been prepared by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) with the help of US services, and a Ukrainian citizen with a Russian passport was recruited to carry it out – he is believed to have crossed into Belarus from Polish territory, but after his first failed attempt to cross the border at Brest, he went to Latvia, from where he ended up in Minsk via Russia. Lukashenka reproached Russian border guards for their lack of vigilance and added that border security with the Russian Federation had been strengthened. He also pointed out that the SBU had used Belarusians residing in Poland to help smuggle in a 'terrorist'. In harsh terms, he slammed opponents of the regime,

confirming the launch of a 'brutal purge' against them, which would also target opponents residing abroad, including in Poland and Ukraine. Lukashenka also attacked President Volodymyr Zelensky, calling him a 'rotter' who condones acts of terror.

Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko categorically rejected Lukashenka's insinuations about the alleged involvement of Ukrainian services in the airport incident. In his view, the creation of an artificial threat from Ukraine is intended to justify support for Russian aggression. He assessed the coarse attack on President Zelensky as an act of weakness by Lukashenka.

On 7 March, The New York Times reported – citing sources in the US government and intelligence – that the attack on the Nord Stream pipeline in autumn 2022 was carried out by a 'pro-Ukrainian group'. However, it was stated that the newspaper's interlocutors emphasised that they had no evidence that President Zelensky or his associates were involved in the operation, or that those involved in damaging the pipelines were acting at the behest of any Ukrainian government officials. The White House urged people 'not to jump to conclusions' and to withhold judgment until investigations into the Nord Stream attack are complete. Information pointing to a Ukrainian trace also appeared in the German media (including the weekly newspaper Die Zeit). The investigation launched in Germany was thought to have identified, among other things, a yacht rented by Ukrainian nationals from a Polish company, which is believed to have served as a platform for the divers responsible for setting and detonating the explosives. Western services, however, are not ruling out the possibility that it may have been a false flag operation designed to suggest Ukrainian involvement. The German media recalled that already at the beginning of February, the federal prosecutor general had conveyed that there was no evidence of Russian perpetration. On 8 March, The Times reported that the name of the private sponsor who allegedly financed the Nord Stream sabotage had been known to Western intelligence for months, and that just a week after the explosions, information was received that a 'private initiative' from Ukraine was behind them.

Referring to the Western press publication, advisor to the head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Mykhailo Podolyak denied Ukrainian involvement in the damage to the Nord Stream pipeline. He pointed out that Kyiv also has no information about alleged 'pro-Ukrainian agents' who could have done this. Furthermore, Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov denied the involvement of Ukrainian official structures in the sabotage. According to Reznikov, 'it would be a certain compliment to our special forces, but it is not our action'.

Ukraine has not backed down from soliciting the US for cluster munitions, including MK-20 bombs, which it wants to use as drone armament. This information was provided on 6 March by US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee members Jason Crowe and Adam Smith. They stated that Ukraine sees cluster munitions as a way to deter repeated Russian assaults in the Bakhmut area. The US ceased production of MK-20 bombs in 2016, but still has more than one million in storage.

On 7 March, another exchange of prisoners of war took place. 130 people returned from Russian captivity, including 87 Mariupol defenders. The Russian Defence Ministry confirmed that the Ukrainian side had handed over 90 Russian soldiers.

## **Commentary**

- Lukashenka's aggressive speech shows that he treated the Machulishchy airport incident as an embarrassment to his own regime. The announcement of a 'purge' to eliminate opponents heralds intense action by security bodies, including in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. This signal shows the irritation of a dictator who fully trusts the information provided by the KGB and who may step up the fight against opponents under the guise of combating an allegedly growing terrorist threat. Nor can it be ruled out that the Belarusian services will attempt to hit opposition representatives residing in Poland and Lithuania. In political terms, Lukashenka's speech confirmed that, in his view, Warsaw and Kyiv, supported by the US, are Minsk's main opponents.
- Western media coverage of the Ukrainian culpability of the damage to the Nord Stream pipeline should be seen as supporting a narrative that is present in the West and which is sceptical of further military aid for Ukraine, especially in a situation where maintaining support is linked to the need to increase arms production. At the same time, they may be a signal to the government in Kyiv to abandon their stance of entitlement and reduce their demands for aid (e.g. to stop demanding fighter jets), as Washington has already publicly suggested. A separate issue is the actual perpetration of the sabotage on Nord Stream, which, as the White House and investigators from Denmark and Sweden (among others) emphasise, has still not been established. It must be emphasised that the pipeline was also built as an installation fulfilling the functions of an underwater reconnaissance system. The use of this, as well as the protection of the entirety of Nord Stream, is the responsibility of the Russian Baltic Fleet. Assuming that the surveillance and protection system for the pipeline is operational, it is highly unlikely that the damage was done by a 'private initiative' without the knowledge and consent of the Russians.