

## Polish and Slovak MiG-29 fighter jets for Ukraine. Day 386 of the war

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Russian forces have made progress on both sides of the M03 highway towards Sloviansk – they have approached the enemy's defence line in the strip of hills on the eastern side of the Donets–Donbas canal. Ukrainian troops are holding off the aggressor to the northeast and south of Chasiv Yar, but they are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver supplies from there to those defending Bakhmut, where Russia has also recorded further advances towards the city centre. Following the capture of the village of Krasnohorivka north of Avdiivka by Russian units, clashes continue in the area of the railway line that was previously the main supply route for the city. In all likelihood, its use is no longer possible and the defenders are left with several local roads west of Avdiivka. Ukrainian forces were expected to repel further attempts at enemy advances in an arc west of Donetsk, on the southern outskirts of Vuhledar and north-east of Kupiansk. Conflicting information is coming in about the situation between Kreminna and Lyman, where fighting is taking place on the eastern side of the Zherebets River. The directions of Russia's attacks indicate the formation of a wide arc to the south, east and north of Siversk. According to Russian sources, on 15 March the Ukrainians attempted a two-way battle reconnaissance south of Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the frequency of Russian attacks on defender positions has decreased – from 90–100 on 13–14 March to 70–75 on 15–16 March. However, it still remains significantly higher than in January and early February (up to 50 attacks per day). Half of the invaders' activity is in the Bakhmut area.

On 14 March, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Valerii Zaluzhnyi stressed that the Bakhmut defence operation is of key strategic importance and stabilises the situation on the entire front. Earlier, President Volodymyr Zelensky held a meeting with the military high command, at which the need to continue defending the city was confirmed. A day later, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, when asked about the significance of the fighting for Bakhmut, stated that it was 'President Zelensky's battle'. Earlier, he had stated that the town had more symbolic than operational significance and that its fall would not necessarily facilitate an offensive by Russia.

The Russians have repeated rocket attacks to the rear of enemy forces in the north-west of Donetsk Oblast, with Kramatorsk being their main target in recent days. On 14 March, rockets also fell on the town of Zatoka in Odesa Oblast, and on 15 March on Kharkiv. Russia's artillery and aviation have continued shelling and bombing along the contact lines

and in the border areas. Kostiantynivka, one of the main communication hubs in the rear of Bakhmut's defence, came under massive shelling. Outside the combat areas, Kherson and its surrounding towns and the Ochakiv area remain the main targets of Russian shelling. Ukrainian forces have shelled, among others, invading military installations in Donetsk and near Mariupol.

On 14 March, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced that Poland could deliver its MiG-29 fighter jets to Kyiv within four to six weeks. In turn, two days later Polish President Andrzej Duda, during a meeting with Czech President Petr Pavel, confirmed that the first four aircraft would be delivered to Ukraine in the coming days. The remaining 10–20 are currently to be serviced and prepared for handover. On 17 March, the decision to send Kyiv 13 MiG-29s was taken by the Slovak government, as announced by Prime Minister Eduard Heger.

On 15 March, the tenth meeting of the contact group of countries supporting Ukraine militarily (the so-called Ramstein Group) took place. Presided over by the head of the US Department of Defense Lloyd Austin, he recalled that the member states had pledged a total of more than 150 Leopard 1 and 2 tanks. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who attended the event, stressed that NATO was ready to donate more air defence systems, armoured weapons and ammunition to the Ukrainian army. During the meeting, the Canadian defence minister announced the delivery to Kyiv of nearly 8,000 pieces of 155mm artillery ammunition, 12 rockets for air defence systems (she did not specify the type) and 1,800 training rounds for 105mm tank cannons. It also confirmed earlier announcements that the number of Leopard 2A4 tanks transferred to the battalion being organised in Poland would be increased from four to eight, and that they would be supplied with an armoured recovery vehicle. These are due to arrive in Ukraine in the coming weeks. The increase from six to ten Leopard 2A4 tanks planned for delivery to the Ukrainian army was confirmed by the head of the Spanish defence ministry after the meeting.

On 14–16 March, new military support packages were also presented by other countries. The Netherlands announced the dispatch of two Alkmaar-type minesweepers (to be delivered to Ukraine by 2025), M3 amphibious bridging vehicles and radiolocation stations. Denmark intends to donate 12.7mm machine guns, missiles for air defence systems, small arms ammunition and a 'large number' of anti-tank mines. Estonia plans to donate sniper rifles and small arms ammunition Lithuania plans to donate 155mm artillery shells, among others. The new package of military aid from Germany included 5,000 155mm artillery shells, an unknown number of guided missiles of this calibre and ammunition for MARS II multi-launcher missile launchers. The delivery of 240 Volvo military trucks, the first of which are due to arrive in Ukraine next week, has been pledged by Belgium.

On 16 March, the Swedish government confirmed it would provide Ukraine with Archer 155mm self-propelled artillery systems and at the same time clarified earlier announcements. The Swedes have decided to deliver eight Archers (in January the media there suggested 12 would be sent), with two to serve as a reserve of spare parts. The government's decision to donate ten Leopard 2A5 tanks is awaiting approval from the Swedish parliament. The total value of the support was estimated at €537 million and the armament is expected to arrive in Ukraine in a few months. On the same day, the French defence minister confirmed that the first AMX-10RC armoured reconnaissance vehicles had

arrived in Ukraine (their dispatch was reported on 17 February). In turn, Ukrainian military intelligence reported the receipt of 30 upgraded 'Polish-Ukrainian' Oncilla 4x4 armoured cars.

The Ukrainian state-owned arms company Ukroboronprom reported the start of the production of 125mm ammunition for tank guns, the first batch of which was already due to be delivered. The defence ministry reported that the company had earlier started producing 82mm and 120mm mortar grenades, followed by 122mm and 152mm artillery ammunition. Production is taking place outside Ukraine (it was not stated where) with the participation of Ukroboronprom's employees.

On 14 March, the secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, Oleksiy Danilov, rejected claims by The Washington Post that the quality of the local army was deteriorating due to the loss of trained soldiers, threatening the spring counter-offensive. On 16 March, the battalion commander of the 46th Independent Airborne Brigade was dismissed for providing information on losses to the US newspaper. He stated that in his battalion of 500 soldiers, 100 had been killed and 400 wounded. A spokesman for the Airborne Forces said the commander had not been allowed to speak to journalists and considered the figures he gave to be exaggerated.

Also on 14 March, Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov pointed to a growing international 'naval coalition' committed to naval reconstruction, adding that the UK and the Netherlands had recently joined it. He also recalled that the first of two corvettes for the Ukrainian navy is being built in Turkey. Previously, naval units were supplied by the US and Belgium. During a meeting in Odesa with the Dutch Defence Minister, he announced that the Dutch government will hand over two Alkmaar-type minesweepers in 2025 to protect shipping lanes in the Black Sea, and that the training of Ukrainian sailors will start in the second half of 2023.

On 13 March, the Ukrainian government passed a bill increasing state budget spending by 537 billion hryvnia (approximately \$14.6 billion). Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal specified that most of the outlays – more than 518 billion hryvnia – would be allocated to the security and defence sector, including payments to the military and the purchase of military and special equipment. On 14 March, the Ukrainian government presented a plan of priority activities for 2023. In the area of security, this includes increasing the production of ammunition, involving the private sector in the development of the defence industry, further cooperation with foreign partners in the procurement and production of armaments and military equipment, supplying the army with drones (including those of its own production), creating an integrated system of defence purchases and demining liberated territories. On 15 March, the Ukrainian defence ministry published a list of military needs to guarantee success on the frontline. It stressed that the country needs supplies of both defensive and offensive weapons – in the first instance, missiles for HIMARS and MARS II launchers, 155mm shells, 120mm mortar grenades, missiles for air defence systems, missiles for anti-tank missile systems, airborne means of destruction, loitering munition (kamikaze drones), projectiles for 105 mm and 125mm tank cannons.

The activity of Ukrainian sabotage groups has increased in the occupied territories. On 13 March, an assassination attempt took place on the so-called deputy head of the Nova Kakhovka administration in the Kherson Oblast, Vitaly Hura. The collaborator was wounded

and the partisan unit 'Atesh' claimed responsibility for blowing up his car. The formation was formed in September 2022 and is made up of Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars who focus on attacks against Russian forces and those complicit with the occupying forces. On 14 March in Melitopol, a local collaborator, Ivan Tkach, who was organising the transport of Russian soldiers to the front line in Zaporizhzhia Oblast, was killed in a car explosion. In turn, on 16 March in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, a fire occurred in unexplained circumstances at the FSB border service building. As a result, an ammunition and fuel storage facility exploded.

On 14 March in Kyiv, a man was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment and confiscation of property on charges of treason, planning a contract killing and participation in illegal armed formations and a terrorist organisation. The Luhansk Oblast resident had been recruited by Russian military intelligence and tasked with organising the assassination of the commander of one of the Ukrainian units. The murder was to be a 'trial' assignment ahead of other assassinations, including that of Minister Reznikov and intelligence chief Kyrilo Budanov. He would have received more than \$100,000 for each assassination. In August 2022, he was detained in Kovel (Volyn Oblast).

The Kyiv regional authorities reported on 14 March that the threat of direct fighting in the capital was minimal. Therefore, they proceeded to dismantle some checkpoints and engineering barricades – useless concrete blocks and sandbags. It was stipulated that this did not mean the complete removal of the fortifications, but only a reduction in their number. They have also been upgraded. This is expected to improve the traffic situation in Kyiv.

### Commentary

- The decision by Poland and Slovakia to transfer MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine has a significant political dimension. These will be the first time that the Ukrainian army will officially receive fighters capable of shooting down enemy aircraft and missile parts from its partners. In 2022 Kyiv received several of these fighters in parts from Poland, as well as a large number of spare parts for aircraft previously owned by the Ukrainian Air Force from several countries (this allowed the life of a large part of the machines damaged in the fighting to be extended). Kyiv is most likely to have already received combat aircraft – Su-25 attack aircraft – from its partners. However, due to their inability to engage in air combat with the enemy (the Su-25s given to Ukraine can only attack ground targets), they were not seen in the information space as full-fledged air support.
- Polish and Slovak MiG-29 fighters will not change the situation on the frontline. Together, the two countries will be able to hand over just over 30 fighters, with some of them being treated as sources of spare parts. They also have far fewer capabilities than the enemy's aircraft (mainly the Su-27 family of multirole fighters) and even the MiG-29s previously used by the Ukrainian air force (the forces of the post-Soviet states are equipped with 9.13 version aircraft with a larger fuel reserve and interference station, while the air forces of the USSR's European satellite countries received the 9.12 export version). The wear and tear of more than three decades of service and the scarcity of spare parts (most of their stock was donated to Ukraine earlier) will also mean that, in combat conditions, some of the donated MiGs may turn out to be disposable machines. The Ukrainian Air Force Command makes no secret of this, and still hopes to acquire Western

aircraft more modern than the MiG-29 fighters and ones which have been properly serviced, above the American F-16.

- Ukrainian forces are not giving up on sabotage operations in the occupied territories. Their targets are local collaborators and occupied facilities. It cannot be ruled out that further incidents involving the destruction of infrastructure on Russian territory are also a manifestation of Ukrainian special services activity, although Kyiv does not admit to carrying them out. Actions in occupied areas make it more difficult for the enemy to maintain a stable situation at the frontline and deter potential collaborators, although the scale of sabotage is not large. Individual actions and the threat that they will continue exert psychological pressure on the invaders and their supporters and increase the costs of maintaining the occupied territories, not least because of the need to increase the scale of law enforcement.