

The Russians have surrounded Avdiivka. Day 389 of the war

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Ukrainian forces are holding back the Russian advance along the M03 highway. The invading troops have failed to make any progress over the past few days; the fighting has stuck on the approaches to the hills separating the Russian forces from Slovyansk and Kramatorsk. In addition, they have pushed the Russians away from the Khromove-Chasiv Yar road, but this has not made it any easier for the Ukrainians to supply Bakhmut. The defenders have also effectively blocked Russian attempts to advance along the western side of the Donetsk-Donbas canal in the direction of Kostiantynivka. However, the Russians have succeeded in slightly pushing Ukrainian units toward Chasiv Yar from the north (Hryhorivka) and northeast (Bohdanivka); they have also made further advances in Bakhmut. Reports from the Ukrainian General Staff indicate that the invaders have cut the railroad line north of Avdiivka and advanced to the north-western outskirts of that town (the Ukrainians are currently defending themselves in the area around the village of Berdychi). Russian forces have also renewed their attacks on Ukrainian positions west of Avdiivka from the south (in the area of Sieverne). A ten-kilometre-wide strip west of Avdiivka remains under Ukrainian control; however, the main supply road to the town (via Orlivka), which currently runs through its centre, has come under Russian fire.

Subsequent attempts by Russian forces to launch assaults in the western part of Marinka (east of Siversk and southwest of Kreminna, and in the area of Novoselivske on the border of the Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts) appear to have failed. According to Ukrainian military sources, the total number of hostile attacks on the defenders' positions fell from 100 on 17 March to 63 on 19 March. However, in the Bakhmut area the number rose (27 on the 17th, and 35 on the 19th), as they did in the Avdiivka area and in Marinka, where 21 attack attempts were made on 17 March. Russian sources reported further attempts by Ukrainian forces to draw out their positions in the Zaporizhzhia oblast (mainly in the Orikhiv area), as well as sabotage and reconnaissance operations on the border of the Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts (particularly in the area of Kupiansk).

On 18 March a fuel depot in Novomoskovsk on the north-eastern territory of the River Dnieper, and unspecified 'non-residential facilities' in the Yavoriv area of Lviv oblast (most likely within the Yavoriv military testing range) were hit during a limited Russian attack with Shahed-136/131 drones. The defenders reported that 10 out of 11 attacking drones (according to the Ukrainian Army General Staff) or 11 out of 16 (according to the Ukrainian Air Force Command) were shot down. The Russians also carried out further missile attacks on Zaporizhzhia and the Ukrainian hinterland in the Donetsk (where Kramatorsk was once again the target) and Kharkiv (Velykyi Burluk) oblasts. Russian artillery and aviation

continued shelling and bombing along the contact lines and in the border areas. On 18 March, the local Ukrainian command reported that the amount of enemy shelling of the liberated part of Kherson oblast had fallen (relative to February) from around 600 to 260–280 artillery rounds per day, supposedly as a result of the depletion of the Russians' ammunition stocks. On 19 March, however, there was a renewed increase in the number of shells fired, to nearly 400. Ukrainian artillery has also destroyed an enemy grouping in the area of Novotroitske village in the occupied part of Kherson oblast.

On 17 March, the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague announced that it had issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the presidential plenipotentiary for children's affairs. They have been charged with responsibility for war crimes in Ukraine related to the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia. All countries that are parties to the Rome Statute of the ICC are legally obliged to detain Putin and bring him to trial (although only 60 of the 123 countries that accepted the statute have since ratified it). Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky called the Court's order a historic decision and a turning point which could bring the end of the Russian aggression against Ukraine closer. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, the issuance of Putin's arrest warrant will increase divisions within the Kremlin elite.

On 18-19 March the Russian president paid a propaganda visit to occupied Sevastopol and Mariupol. It was billed as a fact-finding operation, designed to show that he was directly involved in the hostilities and to allay fears about the possibility of a Ukrainian counteroffensive.

On 18 March, Putin signed a law making it easier to invalidate Ukrainian citizenship for holders of a Russian Federation passport. According to the adopted amendments, the validity now ceases on the date when the relevant statement is submitted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. From that moment on, a person who submits such an application will not be considered a citizen of Ukraine in Russia. At the same time, that person must cease using Ukrainian documents. On the same day, a law on increasing the punishment for 'discrediting participants in the special operation' came into force in Russia: it will now be 15 years' imprisonment. Criticism is banned not only of the regular army or senior military officers, but also of the Wagner mercenary units.

On 18 March, Ukraine's deputy defence minister Hanna Malar assured that the mobilised are not being sent to the front without prior preparation. She pointed out that Russian propaganda is spreading false information about the process of mobilisation in Ukraine, which states that those freshly conscripted are being sent immediately and without any training to the Bakhmut region. In reality, those mobilised who have not hitherto performed any military service are being sent to centres for training privates and NCOs on an abbreviated timetable, but without any drop-off in quality. She also denied that women, including female doctors, are being conscripted without their consent.

On 19 March, the State Communications Service warned that Russian hackers were adding malicious code to software available on pirate websites. These threats persist because IT system administrators in the post-Soviet states are still using unlicensed software, including operating systems. By installing hacked software, these users are giving the Russian intelligence services access to their computer equipment.

Commentary

- The departure of Russian forces to the northwest of Avdiivka, and the threat of besieging the town, follows a pattern similar to that seen in recent weeks in the Bakhmut region. However, Avdiivka is not yet being attacked directly. Sporadic fighting is taking place on its southern outskirts, and is probably intended to tie down Ukrainian forces in the town. This is largely due to the nature of the forces involved: Bakhmut is being stormed by mercenary troops from the Wagner Group, which are themselves being supported and supplied by artillery and aviation from the Russian army. On the other hand regular Russian units, equipped with tanks and armoured combat vehicles, are focused on breaking through the Ukrainian defensive lines north and southwest of Bakhmut. It is likely that only regular units of the Russian Armed Forces are operating in the Avdiivka area. In both cases, however, the Ukrainian defenders are now in a situation of so-called operational encirclement, and are in danger of being completely cut off from the rear.
- The importance of Avdiivka for the further course of operations in the Donbas is much less than that of Bakhmut. Nevertheless, it is an important point of defence limiting the Russians' freedom to Russian strike from the Donetsk side northwards (towards Kramatorsk) and northwest (towards Pavlohrad and the River Dnieper). It is likely that Russian troops have been able to make advances in the area of Avdiivka as a result of the majority of Ukrainian reserves being concentrated over recent weeks in the Bakhmut area, as well as to the south of Donetsk, in Marinka and Vuhledar.