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# Ukraine prepares to launch a counteroffensive. Day 400 of the war

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Russian forces have reached the centre of Bakhmut, where fierce fighting is taking place. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, after making a series of unsuccessful attempts to break through the defences to the northeast and south of Chasiv Yar, the invading forces will probably focus on seizing the town of Orikhovo-Vasylivka south of the M03 main road to Slovyansk. This has been the only site of Russian attacks in the Bakhmut area outside the town itself. The invaders have also failed to make any significant advances in the Avdiivka area or in the arc west of Donetsk. The defenders see the renewed assaults by Russia between Kreminna and Siversk and on the border of the Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts as attempts at battlefield reconnaissance, rather than actual efforts to break through Ukrainian defensive lines. After several days where the Russian operations slowed down, the frequency of their attacks increased again, from a level of around 60 per day during 27–29 March to over 80 on 30 March. A third of these took place in the area of Bakhmut (in previous weeks, the town and its environs had been subject to almost half the total number of attacks).

On 27 and 30 March, the Russians carried out limited attacks using Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones. In the first, the Ukrainian defenders claimed to have shot down 14 of the 15 attacking drones, although they were reported to have caused damage in the cities of Dnipro and Kyiv (according to the military administration in the capital, it was caused by debris falling from the destroyed machines). In the second, the defenders claimed to have shot down 9 of the 10 drones, although no information was given about the effects of the attack. Kharkiv oblast was the main target of the aggressor's missile attacks, including the towns of Bohodukhiv and Druzhkivka. On the night of 30–31 March, a total of nine enemy rockets also fell on Kharkiv city. The same night, a rocket attack was also launched on Zaporizhzhia and its outskirts. Russian artillery and aviation continued to shell and bombard the contact lines and border regions. After last week's hiatus, they also resumed their daily shelling of the Ochakiv area. Kherson and its surrounding villages are also still under constant shelling. On March 29, Ukrainian forces shelled Melitopol.

In an interview with the Associated Press describing Ukraine's military plans on 29 March, President Volodymyr Zelensky withdrew from announcing a spring counteroffensive for the first time in many months. Ukraine would achieve victory over Russia through a series of "small victories" and "small steps." On the same day Oleksiy Danilov, the National Security and Defence Council Secretary, said that the counteroffensive was not limited by time, and should not be treated as a last chance for victory after which the only solution would be

negotiations with the aggressors. A day later, foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba reiterated this thesis in an interview with the Financial Times.

In an interview with Estonian media on 29 March, defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov, when asked when the Leopards donated by the allies would arrive at the front, replied that they would get there in April or May. He added, "You will see them in the counterattack, in accordance with the decision by our General Staff". He stressed that plans for a counterattack in several directions are being made, and the choice of its time and place depends on the moment the military considers most suitable, as well as on the weather conditions. He pointed out that "our country is very wet in the spring", and only tracked equipment could be used in such circumstances.

On 30 March, the Pentagon's spokesman General Patrick Ryder announced that 65 Ukrainian soldiers had completed their basic training in the operation of Patriot systems, and had left for Europe to continue it; they will then return to Ukraine with the Patriots. The training of over 4000 Ukrainian servicemen to staff two brigades equipped with Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and Stryker wheeled armoured personnel carriers will also be finalised. According to Ryder, a total of 11,000 Ukrainian soldiers are currently being trained in several partner countries, with instructors from 26 countries participating in their training.

On 30 March, Germany officially confirmed the transfer to Ukraine of 18 Leopard 2A6 tanks and 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles, along with ammunition for them. In addition, the latest support package included two Bergepanzer 3 armoured recovery vehicles and two WiSENT 1 vehicles with demining ploughs (both types based on the Leopard 2 tank). Two days earlier, Portugal's defence ministry announced it was transferring three Leopard 2A6s to Ukraine. On 29 March, the UK defence minister Ben Wallace confirmed the arrival of the first Challenger 2 tanks in Ukraine, but noted that in order to use them effectively, Ukrainian soldiers will have to undergo additional training. On the same day, the Spanish defence minister Margarita Robles announced that the first six Leopard 2A4 tanks (of a planned 10) will be handed over to Kyiv after Easter. The Czech Republic, in turn, confirmed the dispatch of 15 MR-2 Viktor drone combat kits (a 14.5-mm KPVT coupled machine gun mounted on a Toyota off-road vehicle) to Ukraine.

On 30 March, Macedonian media reported that the government in Skopje had decided to supply Kyiv with Mi-24V combat helicopters. Earlier reports indicated that North Macedonia has 12 such vehicles (which it purchased from Ukraine in 2001); two of the six are still in service, having undergone limited modernisation in the previous decade. A day earlier, the Croatian defence minister Mario Banožić stated that the government in Zagreb was preparing to transfer 14 Mi-8 transport helicopters to Ukraine. On 30 March, the Ukrainian parliamentary deputy Olena Kondratiuk, who was in Bratislava, reported that the first four MiG-29 fighters received from Slovakia were guarding the skies over Kharkiv.

On 28 March, the French defence minister Sébastien Lecornu announced that shipments of 155-mm artillery ammunition to Ukraine would be increased to 2000 rounds per month at the end of March. On the same day, his Slovakian counterpart Jaroslav Naď announced that his country could increase its production of 155-mm ammunition to 100,000 rounds per year, and up to 150,000 if the EU could subsidise it. Slovakia currently produces 30,000 rounds of 155-mm ammunition per year.

A day later, appearing before the US Senate, the Chairman of the College of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley stated that the Pentagon estimates the Russian losses at "well over" 200,000 dead, wounded or missing. Citing the same source, British Defence Minister Ben Wallace reported that 220,000 Russians have been killed or wounded since the start of the war. On the same day, the Ukrainian General Staff reported that 172,340 invading troops had been killed since 24 February 2022.

Also on 29 March, Ukraine's finance minister Serhiy Marchenko said that at the moment his country's main task is to create the conditions for financing military spending. He noted that revenues to the state budget currently amount to 80 billion hryvnias per month, whereas 130 billion hryvnias per month are spent on conducting the war. According to Ukraine's budget plans for 2023, the country should cover half the planned costs of the war on its own; the rest should come from external support.

On 30 March, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on the organisation of the 2023 spring draft. It will last from 1 April to 15 July (two weeks longer than the conscription campaigns held before the outbreak of war). It is assumed that 147,000 Russians between the ages of 18 and 27 will be called up for basic military service. The higher number of conscripts (compared to 134,500 in the spring of 2022 and 120,000 in the autumn) is due to the plan to increase the size of the Russian Armed Forces (to a planned level of 1.5 million). According to the Russian General Staff, none of the conscripts will be sent to the zone of the so-called special military operation.

According to the Ukrainian Defence Ministry's Main Intelligence Directorate, the widely heralded winter offensive has not brought the enemy any significant successes, and the invading army is incapable of conducting any offensive operations of strategic importance. Despite this, if the current intensity of the fighting is maintained, Russia could continue to prosecute the war through the rest of 2023, and even into 2024. According to Ukrainian intelligence, however, the enemy's combat potential has been significantly affected by the Western sanctions, which effectively limit the Russian capacity to produce more armaments. This is evidenced by the decision to send obsolete Soviet equipment (such as T-62 or T-54 tanks) to the front, as well as efforts to maximise the capabilities of Belarusian industry and to obtain armaments from abroad, primarily Iran.

John Kirby, a spokesman for the US National Security Council, said that the military support provided by the US is being used as intended, and that any abuses have so far been minimal. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which is responsible for distributing civilian aid, issued a similar statement.

On 31 March, in his annual address to the nation and parliament, Belarusian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka accused Poland of expanding its armed forces beyond its defence needs. Also, in his view, Poland's "massive" purchases of military equipment in South Korea and the United States are part of a US plan to destabilise Belarus internally, or even, in an extreme case, for an armed assault by the Polish army with the support of a US contingent. Lukashenka offered excerpts, obtained by the Belarusian KGB, of alleged "non-public" speeches by Western generals and the Polish defence minister Mariusz Błaszczak, reportedly contemplating the opening by NATO of a "second front" in Belarus late last year in the absence of a clear Ukrainian advantage. This allegedly growing threat from an "aggressive" West was said to have prompted Lukashenka to enter into talks with Putin

about re-deploying nuclear weapons on Belarus's territory as an effective security guarantee. At the same time, Lukashenka admitted that the removal of nuclear warheads from Belarus in 1996 was carried out against his will, under pressure from then-president of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin, who feared a Western reaction. Lukashenka also suggested that troops were being formed from units of Belarusian "bandits" in exile in Poland, whose task would be to cross the border and destroy Belarus from within "at the right moment". According to Lukashenko, "Western puppet masters" are treating these formations as "cannon fodder" in their forward plans.

**Commentary**

• As spring approached, Kyiv has begun to row back on its message about the counteroffensive it had announced in recent months. The Ukrainian government is now making the launch of such an attack contingent on whether the announcements by its allies of heavy weapons deliveries come to fruition; Kyiv is also emphasising the need to receive Western combat aircraft. Recent statements (especially by Danilov and Kuleba) indicate a growing concern among the Ukrainian leadership that failure of the counteroffensive could result in increased pressure on Kyiv to begin negotiations with the invaders, and to a reduction in military support.

• In the last week of March, the heavy armaments which Kyiv's partners had announced in January began arriving in Ukraine. However, the tanks and armoured combat vehicles delivered so far do not as yet allow full subunits to be constituted. The 'Polish' battalion of Leopard 2A4 tanks is still awaiting deliveries from Spain and will most likely be completed in mid-April, while the mixed 'German' battalion (of Leopard 2A6s and 2A5s) will most likely have to wait until at least May for tanks to arrive from Sweden. Taking the additional training announced by the UK defence minister into account, it is most likely that the company based on Challenger 2s will most likely be operationally ready in May. The situation in terms of combat armoured vehicles is much better; Ukraine is receiving them right away, together with the same number of equipped battalion units, and even in greater numbers. German Marders have already arrived in the country, and the American Bradleys and Strykers should get there later in April. It is still unclear when Sweden will deliver the 50 CV90 infantry fighting vehicles it has promised.

• After the subdivisions are assembled (in May at the earliest), Ukraine will have at its disposal a total of 77 Western tanks (32 Leopard 2A4s, 21 Leopard 2A6s, 10 Leopard 2A5s and 14 Challenger 2s), 149 infantry fighting vehicles (109 Bradleys and 40 Marders), 90 Stryker wheeled armoured personnel carriers, and (according to media reports) up to 40 armoured reconnaissance vehicles with 105-mm AMX-10RC cannon (at least some of which have already arrived in Ukraine). This potential could, if used at one time and place, lead to a breakthrough the Russian defences and develop the counteroffensive which Kyiv has announced. However, the greatest threat to its success would come if a development on the front meant that the Ukrainian command had to use the Western armaments for the ongoing rescue of its most endangered sections.

• Western estimates of Russian losses diverge from those given by Ukraine. The Pentagon's data, which has been made public, shows that they are not increasing at the rate Kyiv claims, and that the disparity between the dead and wounded on both sides is insignificant. At the beginning of February, Washington estimated the total Russian losses at

180,000–200,000 men, and Ukrainian losses at about 100,000. By mid-March, losses among the invaders were estimated to exceed 200,000, compared to 120,000 among the defenders. This would mean that the sides may have lost about 20,000 soldiers each over six weeks. The American reports were denied by representatives of the Ukrainian authorities (Danilov and deputy defence minister Hanna Malar), who maintained that 7–10 enemy soldiers had been killed for each defender. According to Pentagon data, though, the ratio currently stands at 1 to 1.66 in favour of the Ukrainians.