

Ukrainian and Russian attacks on fuel depots. Day 432 of the war

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On 29 April, probably thanks to a Ukrainian drone attack, between four and ten tanks (depending on sources) of petroleum products in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea were destroyed. In turn, a fuel train was said to have derailed (after the tracks had previously been blown up) in Russia's Bryansk oblast. Meanwhile a Russian rocket attack on 30 April destroyed a factory in Pavlohrad where rocket fuel (and ammunition, according to some sources) had been stored, damaging nearby buildings. Two civilians were killed and 40 people were wounded. On the same day, the invaders launched further rocket attacks on Kramatorsk (Russian rockets also struck the city on the night of 1–2 May) and Kostiantynivka. Ukraine also reported the downing of enemy missiles in the Kyiv and Khmelnytskyi oblasts, and a drone strike near an industrial facility in the Zhytomyr oblast. According to a report from the Ukrainian General Staff, on 30 April Ukrainian forces shot down 15 out of 19 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles launched by the enemy. According to the Ukrainian Southern Operational Command, the invaders' missile strikes are aimed at Ukrainian routes and logistics centres.

The State Border Service of Ukraine has reported that the Russians have increased their shelling of the border areas of Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. Meanwhile, Ukraine's energy ministry says that the enemy's systematic shelling of the border areas and the line of contact in recent days has caused significant damage to the power grids in the Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk and Sumy oblasts, which will take several days to repair. On 28 April, a power plant in Donetsk oblast (most likely in the town of Kurakhove) has also been damaged. Once again, Russian shelling of the Kupiansk region has become more frequent (around 525–560 per day in the last days of April), as in the Bakhmut area (452 strikes on 28 April). On 1 May, the invaders' artillery and air attacks on the right bank of Kherson oblasts rose again.

The situation on most sections of the front remains relatively stable. The invading forces made further slight advances in the western part of Bakhmut and in Marinka. However, their renewed attacks in the area of Chasiv Yar west of Bakhmut and (after several days' pause) west of the Donetsk-Donbas canal toward Kostiantynivka were unsuccessful. The Ukrainian defenders also repulsed further attempts at attacks in the vicinity of Avdiivka, where the main fighting is taking place southwest of the town, as well as south of Marinka, southwest of Kreminna, and at the junction of Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts (near the village of Novoselivske). According to the Ukrainian General Staff, on 30 April and 1 May the total number of attacks dropped from about 60 to 40 per day. The Ukrainian army's Eastern

grouping estimated the enemy's forces in the Bakhmut region at 25,600 troops, 65 tanks, 450 armoured combat vehicles, 154 'cannons' (this probably refers to artillery of a calibre above 100 mm) and 56 multiple rocket launchers.

According to a Ukrainian report, during a visit to Kyiv by the presidents of the Czech Republic and Slovakia on 28 April, the Czech leader Petr Pavel announced the preparation of six key projects for the joint production of ammunition and small arms, the overhaul of armoured weapons and the potential production of training aircraft. The Czech president said that the priority here was to locate production at least partially in Ukraine. On the same day, Ukraine's defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov said that Denmark had sent Kyiv the first of the 155-mm CAESAR cannon howitzers it had promised in August 2022. In turn, according to India's *Economic Times*, Pakistan is said to be preparing the transfer of Anza Mark II MANPADs to Ukraine; this will be arranged by Poland's PHU Lechmar.

On 2 May, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared that in August Germany will begin sending Kyiv newly manufactured ammunition for Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns; the Ukrainian army will ultimately receive 300,000 rounds. He also recalled that Germany has so far handed over 34 Gepards (three more are to be delivered) and 6000 rounds of their ammunition. On 30 April, the German government confirmed that it would deliver a second IRIS-T air defence system to Ukraine. According to a report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 28 April, Germany is to supply 250,000 rounds of 155-mm artillery ammunition manufactured by Rheinmetall as part of an EU initiative to transfer one million rounds of this type to Kyiv.

On 29 April, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said that the next phase of the war has begun, in which Ukraine will take the initiative. He pointed out that the invaders have changed their battle tactics and are thinking only of defending the occupied territories, so breaking their resistance will be difficult. The Ukrainians may be helped by the fact that the enemy army is unmotivated, and the Russians are "recruiting people who don't know how to fight". Zelensky believes the counteroffensive will be successful and that Crimea will return to Ukrainian control. On 1 May, Minister Reznikov announced that Ukraine had done everything possible to carry out the counteroffensive successfully, and that its launch and success would depend on the command of the armed forces. The head of military intelligence Kirill Budanov said that "in the near future everyone will see the results" of the offensive, and that Ukraine could improve its position on the front line and disrupt the enemy's logistics in occupied Crimea and the Donbas hinterland.

On 1 May, Reznikov reported that Kyiv was solving the problem of ammunition shortages by relying on the use of precision munitions. He insisted that reserves to support the counteroffensive have been prepared. As he said, one of the key topics in Ukraine's negotiations with its partners is the servicing of military equipment and the supply of spare parts, some batches of which (for the American M-109 self-propelled howitzers, for example) are already being produced by Ukrainian companies.

British military intelligence indicated on 1 May that the Russian defensive lines are being expanded out of fear of a Ukrainian counteroffensive. According to the British, as of last summer, the fortifications have been set up both near the current front line and deep inside the occupied territories. Russian forces have made particular efforts to reinforce the northern border of Crimea, creating a multi-level defence zone there. In turn, hundreds of

kilometres of trenches and engineering obstacles have been built in Russia's Belgorod and Kursk oblasts, allowing the Kremlin to propagate the thesis among the local population that war with NATO is a real possibility.

On 28 April Yevgeny Prigozhin, the owner of the Wagner Group mercenary company, declared that his forces would soon disappear from the battlefield. He blames this on the Russian military, which wants to bleed his troops (made up of released criminals) and is withholding ammunition supplies to them. On 1 May, some 400 prisoners recruited by Prigozhin were moved to the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia oblast; the Ukrainian General Staff said it expects a similar replenishment in Luhansk oblast. It is also known that there are plans to train over 200 convicts at one of the training grounds in the area. Russian soldiers securing the contingent have been ordered to open fire if they attempted to desert or refuse to obey orders.

During a meeting with residents of Gomel and Brest oblasts on 28 April, Belarus's President Alyaksandr Lukashenka called these regions frontline areas. He stressed that he does not want Belarus to be dragged into a bloody massacre, adding that he "doesn't want to send Belarusians to the frontline". He also stated that in his view no-one – including Ukraine – wants to attack Belarus, although he acknowledged that it is necessary to be "ready for anything", and that the army would continue to be reinforced. On 29 April Alyaksandr Valfovich, the secretary of the Belarusian Security Council, said that in the current situation it is necessary to keep all the forces and resources of the national security system in a state of combat readiness. This includes the army, the interior ministry, the KGB, the border guards, the territorial defence, and the so-called "civilian defence movement". He revealed that the reserves will allow about 1.5 million people to be mobilised under arms if needed. On 2 May, the head of the Belarusian KGB Ivan Tertel warned that "a significant deterioration of the operational situation around Belarus is anticipated". In response, Lukashenka acknowledged that the situation is difficult, and that "NATO's military potential is being rebuilt and provocations are taking place" near the borders. He also called on security bodies to take measures to prevent saboteurs from infiltrating the country's territory, and pointed out that there has been an increase in such incidents recently.

On 30 April, the Ukrainian border service reported that in recent times only launches of Russian drones have been recorded from Belarusian territory. Russian units based in the country have abandoned missile attacks and stopped shelling the border areas.

The Ukrainian government has issued contradictory messages on how it plans to deal with residents of the occupied territories. On 30 April, human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets said that the government did not recognize the legality of Russia's 'passportisation' operation, but it was aware that the issuance of Russian citizenship is being carried out under brutal pressure, and so it is considering accepting it as a way for the locals to save their own lives. He stressed that 'passportisation' is another war crime, so those forced to accept Russian documents will not be treated as criminals under Ukrainian law. Commenting on Putin's recent decree authorising the deportation from Russia of people who refused to accept Russian citizenship, he announced that these people would most likely be detained, forming a separate category of civilian hostages. In turn Iryna Vereshchuk, a deputy prime minister and the minister for the reintegration of the temporarily occupied territories, appealed on 1 May to Ukrainians residing in the occupied areas not to

accept Russian passports, not to cooperate with the invaders, and to wait patiently for Ukrainian troops to arrive. She added that the ministry she heads has once again asked Russia and the International Committee of the Red Cross to open humanitarian corridors. This would allow the local population to leave for areas controlled by Kyiv.

Commentary

- Both the Russian missile attacks on Ukrainian supply chains on the frontline and the further expansion of their defence lines indicate that the invaders view a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive as a serious threat. In purely military terms the Russians have prepared themselves well for the defence; any Ukrainian attack will cost them heavily, and their offensive may well fail. Russia is continuing to build up its defences, because - after the previous negative experiences - they are afraid that even good military preparation may turn out to be insufficient. The success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv oblast in September 2022 was primarily due to the Russians' disregard for the enemy; as a result, they failed to prepare their defences properly in that region. Meanwhile in the right-bank part of the Kherson oblast, where the defence was conducted appropriately from the engineering point of view at that time, the invaders could not guarantee their troops would be supplied effectively (the Russians could not effectively counteract the Ukrainian artillery's destruction of the crossings over the River Dnieper). In both cases, the withdrawal of the attacking forces – if we disregard the effectiveness of its conduct in military terms (which was dubious in Kharkiv oblast, but almost exemplary in Kherson oblast) – was equally humiliating in both the political dimension and the public perception. The ongoing preparations for defence indicate that the Russians are doing everything to avoid the same thing happening again.
- Lukashenka's statement, in which he marginalised the possibility of the entry of foreign forces (including the Ukrainian army) onto Belarusian territory, was targeted primarily at his own people, and was intended to reduce the sense of threat that his country could become involved in the armed conflict. At the same time, the regime in Minsk is continuing to emphasise the hostile attitude of the NATO countries, which are allegedly worsening the security situation along the borders with Belarus. This is the justification for keeping its own armed forces on high alert and 'militarising' society, which should be ready to defend the country if necessary. In turn, the KGB chief's words, in which he claimed the destabilisation of Belarus by foreign-trained 'sabotage groups' was a real threat, are an excuse to justify continuing the policy of repression, and lay the groundwork for accusing the opposition of supporting terrorism.