Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 9.05.2023 www.osw.waw.pl

Russia intensifies its missile attacks. Day 439 of the war

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In recent days, the daily number of Russian rocket attacks on Ukrainian territory has begun to rise sharply. According to the local military-civilian administrations, on the evening and night of 5–6 May, the invaders fired eight missiles, and 10, 23 and 34 respectively on the following days. The General Staff and Air Force Command reported smaller numbers; after the latest attack, they limited the scope of their reports to the cruise missiles that the Ukrainian air defences were able to shoot down. On the evening and night of 8–9 May, the Ukrainians neutralised 23 of the 25 Kalibr and Kh-101/Kh-555 missiles launched against them. In addition to these, the Russians launched at least 14 Kh-22 cruise missiles, one Iskander ballistic missile and 19 missiles from S-300 systems in their attacks between 5 and 9 May.

Russian missiles are still targeting logistics and infrastructure facilities, mainly warehouses on the sites of industrial enterprises. In addition to the defenders' immediate hinterland in Donetsk and Kharkiv oblasts, the cities of Kyiv, Dnipro, Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia, the Kherson and Odesa oblasts, and unnamed localities in Cherkasy oblast were attacked. The Ukrainian capital's air defence announced 100 percent effectiveness; however, for two consecutive nights following the latest incidents the city experienced damage and fires caused by shrapnel. On the night of 8 May, Kyiv came under massive attack by Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones, of which the Russians were said to have used 36 (the Ukrainian General Staff put the number at 35). Ukrainian forces announced that they successfully shot down all of them.

The defenders are continuing to hold their positions in the western part of Bakhmut, trying to slow the Russian advance in the town and the settlements on its outskirts. The main weight of the fighting is shifting to the region around Chasiv Yar, against which Russian forces have renewed attacks from the northeast and south. The defenders repulsed further attempts to attack south-east of Kostiantynivka and west of Horlivka, as well as near Avdiivka, in Marinka, and between Kreminna and Siversk. On 6 May, the Ukrainian General Staff reported the first Russian attack north-east of Kupiansk after a days-long pause. On two occasions (6 and 8 May), Russian sources reported on a Ukrainian attempt at reconnaissance by fire in the Avdiivka area. On 5 May, the occupying government of the Zaporizhzhia oblast ordered the evacuation of 18 frontline villages, justifying it by Ukrainian shelling in preparation for the long-heralded counteroffensive.

Russian artillery and aviation continued shelling and bombing along the entire line of contact and in the border areas, mainly in Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts. The shelling of the right bank of Kherson oblast has fallen off slightly, although that of Nikopol has increased.

The Russians reported further acts of Ukrainian sabotage in occupied Crimea, which was attacked by at least 10 drones on 7 May, as well as two such actions in the town of Shebekino in Belgorod oblast.

On 7 May, the Wagner Group's founder Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that an agreement had been reached for the Russian army to supply it with the ammunition and armaments it needs to continue its operations. The Russian defence ministry has appointed General Sergei Surovikin as the ministry's intermediary with the Wagner Group – and, as Prigozhin put it, the person who will take all the decisions in the operation to be conducted by the private military company. On 8 May, Prigozhin reported that ammunition had begun to reach the Wagner troops, and that they were continuing their assault in Bakhmut. According to him, 95% of the town's area is under Russian control. Commenting on Prigozhin's earlier reports about the lack of ammunition as the main reason for the transfer of responsibility and the withdrawal of the Wagner Group from Bakhmut, the spokesman for the Ukrainian Army's Eastern Group of Forces, Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty, said that Wagner's problem is not a lack of ammunition, but the ability to replenish their personnel losses and fulfil their commitments. According to him, the enemy has enough ammunition, and has been firing more than 25,000 artillery shells per day towards Bakhmut, Lyman and Kupiansk. Between 5 and 8 May, they fired between 415 and 520 shells per day in the Bakhmut area alone.

On 6 May, the commander of the Ukrainian Air Force General Mykola Oleshchuk announced that "thanks to the Patriot system" a "matchless" Russian Kh-47 Kindzhal hypersonic missile had been shot down. He added that this information could not be reported until now because "it could have been used by the enemy". Earlier, Air Force spokesman Colonel Yuri Ihnat dismissed reports that a ballistic missile had been shot down over Kyiv on the night of 4 June (even though the *Defence Express* website reported that it had indeed been a Kindzhal). The Ukrainian side is taking advantage of the situation to renew appeals to the West to deliver them as many Patriot and SAMP/T air defence systems and F-16 fighter jets as soon as possible. Ihnat stressed that "it is too early to rejoice at the downing of the Russian Kindzhal aeroballistic missile over Kyiv", because there are still not enough modern armaments in Ukraine. On 8 May, he said that when Ukraine receives all the aid its Western partners have promised (in addition to the previously mentioned types of armament, he also mentioned NASAMS systems), it will have the best air defence in the world.

On 5 May, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that in Helsinki and the Hague, where he had been in the previous days, he had obtained confirmation that in the near future Ukraine will receive large packages of the military support it needs for a successful counteroffensive. The next day, referring to the news that the Russians had worked out methods of avoiding fire from US-made HIMARS multiple rocket launchers, defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov once again called for the transfer of missiles with a range of at least 150 km. He stated that Kyiv is also still asking for missiles with a range of 300 km (ATACMS), although Ukraine's partners are unwilling to provide them for fear of further escalating the conflict. Ukraine is receiving HIMARS rockets with a range of up to 80 km, and according to Reznikov, the enemy has now moved its logistics facilities up to 120 km away. According to Western media, the Russians have also learned how to disrupt the guidance systems for the GMLRS missiles being transferred to the Ukrainians.

During a meeting with German defence minister Boris Pistorius on 5 May, Denmark's acting defence minister Troels Lund Poulsen announced that the two countries would jointly transfer 80 Leopard 1 tanks to Ukraine. Once training is completed, which is expected to take about a month, the tanks would "be ready for deployment in Ukraine" (the date of 1 June was mentioned). On the same day, the EU Council gave its final approval to set aside €1 billion under the European Peace Facility (EPF) to purchase 155-mm artillery ammunition and, at Kyiv's request, missiles for Ukraine. These will be purchased from companies based in the EU and Norway.

On 7 May, Turkey's foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that the US had asked Ankara to hand over Russian S-400 air defence systems purchased by Turkey to Ukraine, and that this request had been turned down. A day later, Polish defence minister Mariusz Błaszczak, who was in Canada, announced that Poland had delivered 10 MiG-29 fighter jets to Kyiv, while the Associated Press reported that Washington will announce a new $1.2 billion military aid package on 9 May as part of the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative. These funds are mainly to be allocated to long-term measures to strengthen Ukraine's air defence (the purchase of Hawk systems, ammunition and drones), and presumably for supplies of artillery and ammunition for it.

During the Victory Day parade in Moscow on 9 May, Vladimir Putin gave a short speech in which he stated that "a real war with Russia has been unleashed", and announced that the Russian Federation would continue to defend itself and the Donbas. He referred to the attack on Ukraine as a "special military operation", and stressed that the fate of Russia's statehood and the nation was being decided in the process. He added that its opponents have been attempting to destroy Russia, and have gathered "neo-Nazi scum from all over the world" for this purpose. He pointed out that in many countries monuments to Soviet soldiers are being destroyed and a cult of Nazis and their accomplices is being created, while the real heroes are being slandered and their memory erased. According to Putin, "such desecration of the deeds and sacrifices of the victorious generation is also a crime". The parade was attended by 530 soldiers who had taken part in combat operations in Ukraine. Putin stressed that "many volunteer combat formations" are fighting on the frontline: these words should be seen as a nod to the Wagner Group. Putin was accompanied during the parade by the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus, as well as the prime minister of Armenia.

On 6 May in the Novgorod oblast there was an assassination attempt on Zakhar Prilepin, a writer, member of the Just Russia party and a leading anti-Ukrainian propagandist. As a result of an explosive charge planted in his car, Prilepin, who was returning from the Donbas to Moscow, was seriously injured. A few hours after the incident, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation reported that the author of the attack had been detained, and had confessed that he had acted on orders from Ukrainian special services. On 7 May, the Russian Foreign Ministry called the attack a "terrorist act", blaming not only Kyiv but also its "Western patrons", primarily the US. Ukraine's Security Service has neither confirmed nor denied its involvement in the attack.

On 8 May, British military intelligence confirmed that attempts are being made in Russia to recruit labour migrants from Central Asia into the army. For this purpose, recruiters speaking Tajik and Uzbek are visiting mosques and immigration offices. They offer

potentially interested men $2390 to sign a contract, as well as a monthly salary of up to $4160. Migrants are also being offered an expedited path to Russian citizenship, within six months to one year, instead of after five years. According to the British intelligence report, the Russian government wants to put off the start of a new wave of compulsory mobilisation for as long as possible, out of fear of increasing public discontent.

Ukraine's deputy defence minister Oleksandr Pavluk announced plans on 8 May to train 5000 sappers. In cooperation with the US company Tetra Tech, a specialised centre will be established to train 500 people a year for this work, and the domestic industry in Ukraine will start producing equipment to detect and neutralise explosives. Pavluk pointed out that sappers currently have to cover a territory of more than 174,000 km^2, 14,000 km^2 of which is maritime. According to World Bank calculations, the cost of demining Ukraine this year alone will exceed $397 million.

According to independent media in Belarus, the Russians are looking to start production of Iranian drones in that country. Engineers from Iran, accompanied by officers from Russia's FSB and the Belarusian KGB, were recently scheduled to visit the radio-technical plant in Gomel. Launching full-scale production of Iranian drones in Belarus would allow Russia to overcome the logistical problems it currently faces in having to transport them from Iran.

The International Nuremberg Principles Academy, a foundation promoting international criminal law founded by Germany and the Bavarian state government, has adopted a declaration on Russia's war crimes in Ukraine. The document includes a proposal to expand the powers of the International Criminal Court and create a special tribunal to prosecute the crimes (as understood under international law) committed in Ukraine. Ukraine's foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba welcomed the declaration, as it establishes a direct link between the Nuremberg Tribunal and the Special Tribunal for Crimes of Aggression against Ukraine, for which Kyiv has been lobbying.

Commentary

- Moscow's 9 May celebrations resembled an empty ritual. The Russian president's speech contained no new elements indicating any changer in his position on the need to continue the military action against Ukraine. In line with the Kremlin's current propaganda line, Putin stressed that Russia is the victim of foreign aggression by modern "Nazis", and that the ongoing war is existential in nature, as it will determine the continued existence of Russian statehood. It is noteworthy that despite preparations, the participation of heavy equipment in the parade was limited. Most likely, the organisers did not want to prolong it too much for fear of possible incidents that could have disrupted the festivities. The presence of the leaders of most CIS countries allowed the Kremlin to maintain the impression that they all support the attack on Ukraine and Putin's foreign policy.
- Prigozhin's speech criticising Russia's top military leadership for failing to adequately support the Wagnerians, his threat to withdraw them from the positions they hold (albeit only after being relieved in place), and the subsequent news that the Wagner Group has reached an agreement with the Russian defence ministry confirm that the ongoing fighting for Bakhmut since December is one of the most serious challenges the invaders have faced since the beginning of the war. Although the Russians control most of the

town (although probably less of it than Prigozhin has reported) and are close to capturing it, the defenders have nevertheless managed to channel and slow down the aggressor's operations for some months now. After the failure of its strike from the Kharkiv oblast towards Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, and its subsequent expulsion from that oblast by the Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022, the seizure of Bakhmut was the easiest way (aside from the severity of the fighting) for the Russians to reach the administrative centre of the Ukrainian-controlled part of the Donbas. It should be recalled that seizing this area remains the minimum goal of the Russian aggression.