

The Ukrainians leave Bakhmut. Day 452 of the war

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On 20 May, Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that the Wagner Group he owns had seized all of Bakhmut, and said his mercenaries would hand over their positions to regular Russian army troops by 25 May. The Russian defence ministry confirmed the report. On 21 May, the Kremlin reported that Vladimir Putin had congratulated the Wagner Group's assault troops and all the soldiers of the Russian Armed Forces units who had given them the necessary support in taking the town.

The Ukrainian side denies reports that it has totally lost Bakhmut, saying that defenders are still holding out on the town's western outskirts. The fighting is still mainly focused around the town itself, especially in the strip between its southwestern outskirts and the Donets-Donbas canal. According to some sources, the defenders (the 3rd and 5th Assault Brigades) have already captured a line of hills adjacent to Klishchiivka, which would be a convenient starting position for further assaults in the eastern or southern direction. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, Russian forces have once again made an unsuccessful attempt to attack on the western side of the canal, in the area of Bila Hora. Small-scale fighting is taking place in Avdiivka, Marinka and other towns in the Donbas.

The Ukrainian Air Force Command (AFC) stated that on the night of 19–20 May, the Russians attacked Kyiv and Kyiv oblast with 18 Shahed-136/131 drones, all of which were shot down. Two drones of this type were also downed by anti-aircraft systems in the east of the country. On the night of 21–22 May, military facilities and critical infrastructure on the River Dnieper were subjected to a major attack. According to the AFC, the Russians used 16 missiles of various types (four Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles, five Kh-22 cruise missiles and two Iskander-M ballistic missiles; in addition, five missiles were launched from S-300 systems) and 20 Shahed-136/131 drones. Anti-aircraft defence units were able to shoot down all the drones and the Kh-101/Kh-555 missiles. The rest hit their targets; the scale of losses on the Ukrainian side is still unknown. The Russians also used S-300 missiles to attack the towns of Lyman, Slavyansk and Kostiantynivka.

On 19–21 May, Ukrainians attacked airfields and other military facilities in Mariupol and Berdyansk using Storm Shadow missiles. There is no reliable information on the Russian losses. The Ukrainian side also reported the downing of a Su-35 multirole aircraft over the Black Sea.

From 19 to 21 May, the G7 summit was held in Hiroshima, attended by President Volodymyr Zelensky; he held a series of bilateral meetings with the leaders. The main topic was obtaining support for his embattled country; Japan announced that it would provide Kyiv with about 100 vehicles belonging to the Japanese Self-Defence Forces, as well as 30,000

food rations.

On 19 May, President Joe Biden expressed support for the delivery to Ukraine of fourth-generation Western multirole aircraft, such as F-16s. Later the same day, Denmark declared it would join the British-led coalition of the Netherlands and Belgium, which expressed their readiness to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fighter jets, with the training programmes set to begin in early summer. Which countries will provide the fighters, and how many of them there will be, remain unresolved issues. The Ukrainian media have said that Kyiv could receive about 45 planes, but this figure has not yet been officially confirmed.

On 21 May, the US announced the 38th military aid package to Ukraine, this one worth \$375 million. The Biden administration announced the transfer of additional ammunition for HIMARS launchers, 105-mm and 155-mm calibre artillery shells, TOW and Javelin anti-tank guided missiles, AT-4 grenade launchers, laser-guided rockets, more demolition munitions and armoured bridging systems, armoured medical treatment vehicles, additional logistics vehicles with their equipment, thermal imaging systems and unspecified spare parts.

On 22 May, the Ukrainian General Staff indicated that the enemy had reduced the period for training the prisoners it has recruited to 10 days. This demonstrates how high the losses suffered by Russian forces are. Earlier, it was reported that a military camp in the Luhansk oblast was holding about 1000 people transported from prisons, and that their training was expected to take four weeks.

Commentary

- Prigozhin's declaration that all of Bakhmut has been seized is symbolic. The battle for the town began last August and is still going on, but the brunt of the fighting has now shifted to its immediate vicinity, where the Ukrainian side has been trying to counterattack for more than a week. Wagner's group has occupied the town, which is now completely destroyed and lacks any basic infrastructure (such as water supplies) and is in a dire sanitary situation. For several months the buildings of Bakhmut provided a convenient point of resistance for the Ukrainians, but currently their ruins present much less defensive value for the Russians. The ability of the severely battle-scarred Wagner Group to replenish its losses quickly and resume its operations remains an open question.
- Late last summer, the Ukrainians adopted the Russian-imposed way of fighting: they put up stiff resistance to the Wagner Group's massed attacks and fought for every position, first on the outskirts of Bakhmut and Soledar, and then in the areas surrounding those towns. At that stage, the Ukrainian command did not risk retreating westward just for the sake of drawing the enemy deeper into its own lines and attempting to beat them in manoeuvre warfare. It therefore applied the tactics it tried in 2022 during the battles for other towns in the Donbas. The Ukrainians managed to maintain a stable grouping in Bakhmut at all times, and prevented the town from being completely encircled. However, this strategy came at a price: there have been heavy losses, which are currently difficult to estimate, although they have arguably been less than the Russian losses. After nine months of fighting, the Ukrainian forces at Bakhmut have retained their ability to conduct offensive operations.

- The Russian announcement of the seizure of Bakhmut – in addition to the propaganda value, which is intended to give the impression of having achieved a supposedly landmark victory on the front – has allowed the Kremlin to try and quell the conflict between the Defence Ministry and Prigozhin (the latter accused its leadership of ineptitude and sabotaging the supply of ammunition to the mercenary troops). The Kremlin's indication that it was the mercenaries who captured Bakhmut, and that the regular forces only supported them, can be read as a gesture indicating that Putin appreciates the involvement of Wagner in the combat operations. Honouring them, however, does not mean supporting Prigozhin's ambitions, as evidenced by the omission of his name from the press release; it is rather a symbolic recognition of the mercenary troops' efforts, and a *de facto* legalisation of their existence as an autonomous part of the armed forces.
- The US agreement to supply Western-made aircraft to Kyiv represents the breaking of another taboo in the sphere of Western military aid. Training the pilots will take at least 17 weeks. If it begins in June, the first planes could arrive in Ukraine in mid-October. By that time, it will be necessary to pick the particular planes that will be used, and then to overhaul them (possible repairs and removal of some secret equipment).
- Single fighters, even modern ones, will not make a difference to the overall course of the conflict. What is needed are deliveries of entire subunits – that is, squadrons (in Ukraine a squadron consists of 12 aircraft). In Europe, only the Netherlands has a significant number of F-16 aircraft that it could hand over (to be precise, it has a few dozen stored and inoperable F-16 AM/BM Block 20 MLUs and 28 fully operational ones). Moreover, the Netherlands and Belgium have extensive expertise in overhauling and servicing these aircraft. Denmark would be able to pledge up to 10 fighters, but without the support of the United States in terms of spare parts and armaments, and without further deliveries in the future (the US is withdrawing up to several dozen F-16s from active service each year), it will be impossible to keep a significant number of Western fighters in service in Ukraine. At the same time, it remains unclear how many pilots who could receive adequate training to fly F-16s are available to the Ukrainian Air Force.