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Slowdown on the front. Day 456 of the war

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Ukrainian forces failed to break through the Russian defences north and southwest of Bakhmut, and after 22 May, when the command of the Eastern grouping declared that some slight advances in the field had still been made, they went on the defensive again. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Land Forces commander General Oleksandr Syrskyi was still able to mention the successes his troops had had in attacking the aggressor's flanks. On 25 May, deputy defence minister Hanna Malar indirectly admitted that Bakhmut had been lost. As recently as the previous day, Malar and Ukrainian commanders had maintained that the defenders still controlled part of the so-called Samolot region within the town. However, Ukrainian troops are now said to control only the outskirts of that area.

The Russians have again seized the initiative in the vicinity of Bakhmut, and have attempted to regain the positions to the north and southwest of the town which they had lost in previous weeks (in the area of the villages of Khromove and Ivanivske). The Russians' attacks have been sporadic: according to the Ukrainian command, they made three attempts to attack on 23 May, and two the following day. On 25 May, the invading forces began relieving subunits of the Wagner PMC, which are being replaced by regular Russian army units. According to Wagner's leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, the mercenaries' withdrawal from Bakhmut is expected to be completed by 1 June. The ongoing rotation is to be shielded by increased artillery and aviation activity, which is continuously attacking Ukrainian positions near the city and the defenders' hinterland in the Chasiv Yar area.

For the first time in more than six months, the main weight of the fighting has shifted from Bakhmut to other areas, especially around Avdiivka. The Russians have repeated their attacks on this town, as well as towns north and southwest of it, but without success. Further attempts to attack in Marinka and its outskirts, as well as in the areas of Bilohorivka in the Luhansk oblast and Masiutivka northeast of Kupiansk have also failed. The overall intensity of fighting has dropped off considerably and, according to the Ukrainian General Staff, has not exceeded 30 clashes per day in any area.

The Russians have stepped up their missile and drone attacks on the rear of Ukrainian forces in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. On 22 and 26 May their main target was Dnipro city, where industrial and transportation infrastructure was destroyed. On 22 May, the city of Zaporizhzhia came under attack, and in the following days rockets fell on localities around Kharkiv. On 25 May, a Russian rocket attack destroyed the Karlovsky Reservoir dam in Donetsk oblast, through which the main M04 Donetsk-Dnipro road runs. This attack interrupted the main supply route for the Ukrainian forces fighting northwest of Donetsk. Due to the threat of flooding, the local authorities ordered the evacuation of some

villages south of the dam. Kyiv was also attacked on 25 and 26 May, but its defenders declared that all the rockets and drones had been shot down, and only minor damage from falling shrapnel occurred.

The General Staff and Air Force Command of Ukraine reported that on 22 May the defenders shot down four of 20 missiles (all of the Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles were downed) and all 21 of the Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones; on 23 May all six, and on 25 May all 36 drones of this type were destroyed. Meanwhile, during a night attack on 26 May, the Russians lost 10 out of 17 missiles (all the Kh-101/Kh-555s were downed) and 23 out of 31 Shahed-136/131 drones. Their Kh-22 cruise missiles, Iskander-M ballistic missiles and guided missiles from S-300 systems passed out of range of the Ukrainian air defences. The exact model of four missiles the attackers used has not been confirmed.

The Russians are continuing to shell and bomb Ukrainian positions along the line of contact and in border areas, with air activity increasing. According to the local administration, there was a massive strike on Kherson on 23 May (147 shells of various types). Outside the combat areas Nikopol and Ochakiv have also been consistently targeted. In turn, Ukrainian forces intensified their attacks on the enemy's hinterland: the targets included Donetsk and Berdyansk. Russian sources said Ukrainian drone attacks were launched in occupied Sevastopol, as well as in Belgorod and Krasnodar.

On 24 May, the Russian defence ministry reported that a surface drone attack on the Black Sea Fleet intelligence ship *Ivan Khurs* had been repulsed. It was thought to have occurred 140 km northeast of the entrance to the Bosporus Strait. According to the Russians, the ship is expected to continue its mission. On 25 May, however, a video appeared on the internet suggesting that the *Ivan Khurs* may have been hit by one of the drones and suffered damage.

On 25 May, the 12th meeting of the contact group of countries supporting Ukraine militarily in the Ramstein format was held online. Summarising the meeting, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that strengthening the ground-based air defence component was most important. The meeting's participants will review their available stockpiles again with a view to increasing supplies to Ukraine, and the US will enter into contracts with private companies to send additional air defence systems. A plan to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fighters or other aircraft was agreed upon; the training coalition will be led by Denmark and the Netherlands, and joined by Belgium, Norway, Poland and Portugal. Austin expressed the hope that the training would begin in the coming weeks. He also stressed that the financing of a possible programme to hand over fighter jets to Ukraine should be handled by all the partners, especially those who will not be ready to give up their own planes. The third issue was the discussion of long-term support for Ukraine; one part of this will involve the creation of companies to overhaul armaments and military equipment. The US defence secretary recalled that the value of assistance from the Ramstein Group participants has so far reached $65 billion.

General Mark Milley, the Chairman of the College of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stressed that Russia cannot win the war militarily. In his view, Ukraine is able to liberate all the occupied territories, albeit not in the near future, which means the prospect of prolonged, bloody and heavy fighting. According to Milley, F-16 fighter jets would not be effective enough at the moment due to the invaders' significant air superiority. Milley also referred to the acts of

sabotage carried out in Russia's Belgorod oblast, after which the wreckage of US vehicles was found. He recalled that US-supplied weapons may not be used for attacks on Russian territory; however, he pointed out that the US side does not have enough information about what took place there. On 26 May John Kirby, representing the US administration, communicated that Washington had made it clear in its talks with the Ukrainian side that it did not want to facilitate attacks on the territory of the Russian Federation.

On the sidelines of the Ramstein Group meeting, Finland announced it would transfer unspecified air defence and munitions worth €109 million to Ukraine. Lithuania will also send a new package which includes drones and ammunition. The Spanish government has decided to transfer another four Leopard 2A4 tanks and a batch of M-113 TOA tracked transporters, and Canada announced it will deliver 43 AIM-9 air-to-air guided missiles. The Canadians will also increase the training of Ukrainian military medical service personnel as part of Operation UNIFIER, which has been ongoing since 2015.

On 23 May Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, announced that EU countries had so far transferred 220,000 artillery shells and 1300 rockets to Ukraine as part of the agreement reached in March to supply Ukraine with ammunition. The next day, in turn, the Dutch defence ministry notified that it would allocate €260 million for the joint purchase of 155-mm ammunition. Borrell also said that several countries, including Poland, have begun training Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fighter jets. This was denied by a spokesman for the Ukrainian Air Force Command, Colonel Yuri Ihnat, who said that the preparation process is underway, but training has not yet begun. Ihnat noted that it would not be possible to send a large number of pilots for training due to the air force's involvement in the fighting. The next day he reported that a group of young pilots will go for the training. Citing the conclusions drawn from the tests of Ukrainian pilots in the US, he said that the training, which was originally supposed to last six months, could now be completed in four.

On 23 May, the Danish defence minister Troels Lund Poulsen conveyed that his country, together with other European allies, intends to begin a six-month programme for training Ukrainian pilots, albeit no earlier than June. In turn, Pentagon spokesman General Patrick Ryder said that deliveries of F-16s to Ukraine are being considered in the longer term, and will not be relevant to the planned counteroffensive. The next day, the *Foreign Policy* website reported that the UK will probably become the first country to start the ground training of pilots as a prelude to later training on F-16 fighters or other types of aircraft; Ukraine is expected to be ready to send 20 pilots.

On 24 May, the US State Department approved the sale of the NASAMS air defence system and equipment to Ukraine at Washington's expense (the contract is worth $285 million). In turn, General Ryder announced that next week US instructors will start training 250 Ukrainian servicemen in Germany to form crews and operate Abrams tanks. Their training, on 31 M1A1s, is to last ten weeks. A similar number of tanks will be overhauled in the United States for deployment to Ukraine by autumn. On the same day, the General Staff of the Ukrainian army announced that Japan would donate 100 vehicles and 30,000 rations to the army. The first two vehicles have already been scheduled to depart for Ukraine.

On 25 May, Reuters reported that a new $300 million package of US military aid will include additional guided missiles (GMLRS) for HIMARS launchers and ammunition. In turn, the

Swedish defence minister Pål Jonson notified that the government in Stockholm is considering a request from the Ukrainian Air Force to test the Swedish-made JAS 39 Gripen fighter, although Sweden is not considering transferring aircraft to Ukraine. On 26 May, Ukraine's defence ministry said it would receive Swedish 155-mm Archer howitzers in the summer. Ukrainian crews are also expected to finalise their training on CV90 infantry fighting vehicles.

On 22 May a sabotage and reconnaissance group of 80–90 men, consisting of soldiers from the Russian Volunteer Corps (RKO) and the 'Freedom of Russia' Legion (which operates as part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine) advanced several kilometres into Russian territory. The unit, which used several light armoured vehicles, made a raid through border villages in Belgorod oblast. In neither case did they encounter strong resistance from the enemy. The operation was publicised in the Ukrainian media, with Kyiv portraying the group's actions as the beginning of Russia's liberation from the Putin regime. The governor of Belgorod oblast announced the imposition of a 'state of anti-terrorist operation' in the raion of Grayvoron, and called on the population to evacuate deeper into Russian territory. Kremlin press secretary Dmitri Peskov asserted that steps had been taken to "destroy Ukrainian saboteurs", while not referring to any Russian involvement. A day later, the Russian defence ministry reported that the enemy unit had been broken up; the RKO denied this, estimating its own losses at two dead and 12 wounded. The attack forced the Russians to redeploy a large force to the Belgorod oblast, troops which had previously been deployed near the front line in the Donbas (according to the media this group numbered about 4000 men). On 24 May, a spokesman for Ukraine's military intelligence service admitted that his institution was indeed cooperating with Russian volunteer troops, mainly in the area of military reconnaissance. He stressed that the operation had been carried out on the initiative of the Russians fighting on the Ukrainian side, and Ukrainian armed forces had not been involved. On 25 May the RKO renewed its foray into Russian territory and entered the village of Glotovo, 6 kilometres from the border.

On 25 May in Minsk, the heads of the Russian and Belarusian defence ministries signed an agreement regulating the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. The Belarusian defence minister Viktar Khrenin said it was a response to hostile actions by the West. He stressed that the new armaments are intended to strengthen the defence of the western borders of the so-called Union State. The Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu said NATO's military actions are aggressive, and stipulated that the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus did not mean they were being handed over to the Belarusian army: control over them and the decision to use them remains solely with Russia. During a visit to Moscow, Alyaksandr Lukashenka confirmed that the process of moving nuclear weapons to Belarus had begun.

On 25 May, Ukrainian media reported that state arms procurement companies had received contracts worth 8.9 billion hryvnias (around $241 million) from the defence ministry. These contracts have not been fulfilled, and much of the money has been moved abroad. In early 2023, the defence ministry began filing lawsuits against suppliers such as Ukrspetseksport, Spetstekhnoeksport, the Progres company and the Defence Procurement Agency, demanding the return of the money. Only two out of thirty cases saw rulings from the courts to return 415 million hryvnias (about $11.2 million). Most of the unfulfilled contracts were

signed in March and April 2022. On the same day, defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov assured that defence procurements would be carried out based on the model used in NATO countries. The Defence Procurement Agency, which was established in July 2022, is responsible for their implementation. According to a government decision on 23 May, it has the status of a separate service, subordinate to the head of the Defence Ministry but unconnected to the ministry's apparatus. It was clarified that the agency is the sole authority for army contracts, which means the definitive exclusion of any other intermediaries. Its structure is modelled on NATO's Support and Supply Agency; this is intended to ensure transparency in arms purchases and eliminate corruption.

Commentary

- After the Russian seizure of Bakhmut and the failure of Ukrainian attempts to break through the aggressor's defences to the northwest and southwest of the town, both sides have noticeably slowed the pace of operations. They are using this period to regroup and reinforce their ranks. It is impossible to state clearly which of them will be the first to resume larger-scale activity. The invaders' destruction of the dam on the Karlivka reservoir does not offer an answer to that question. The disruption of the defenders' logistics by (briefly, we should assume) cutting off their main supply route northwest of Donetsk may well indicate an intention to imminently intensify their own operations in the area, as well as a desire to relieve the strain on those units which have been constantly exposed to Ukrainian artillery fire. The initiative remains with the Russian side, but the attacks they have been making recently are more in the nature of testing the defences than attempting to break through them. The invaders have been able to reduce their activity for a while thanks to the propaganda success they have claimed after taking Bakhmut; meanwhile the Ukrainian side has come under additional pressure from the repeated announcements of an imminent counteroffensive over recent months.
- The message from the countries supporting Ukraine militarily – especially the United States – still has not clarified when and how it will receive combat aircraft. It cannot be ruled out that the decisions on this matter have already *de facto* been taken, and that the declarations made are simply following on from actions already taken (Borrell's statement about Ukrainian pilots starting training on F-16s and Austin's statement about spreading the cost of supplies among the partners would indicate this). Nevertheless, Kyiv has little chance of obtaining the planes before the autumn. In all likelihood, Washington has still not taken a final decision on the scale and scope of their delivery. The continuing reluctance to escalate is evidenced by the Americans' irritation over the use of equipment already donated in the sabotage operations on Russian territory.
- The successful diversionary operation by Russian volunteers is another action of this type: similar ones occurred in March and April this year. Like the previous ones, it was carried out with the support of the Ukrainian army and military intelligence. Although it was of little military significance, it revealed the weakness of the Russian forces responsible for protecting the border, and above all their limited ability to respond quickly to such incidents. In terms of psychological warfare, it sowed panic among the local population and undermined the authority of the authorities, which were shown to be unable to guarantee security. Kyiv's emphasis on the participation of Russian formations on the Ukrainian side in the war is intended to support these divisions in society, and to

demonstrate that some Russians are ready to use arms in their fight against Putin.

- The signing of the Belarusian-Russian agreement on the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) formalises Putin's announcement in late March that a depot allowing the storage of such armaments will be constructed in Belarus by 1 July. It will be at the exclusive disposal of the Russian army; this means that additional forces will have to be sent to Belarus to protect the warehouse and operate the delivery systems on the armaments located there. The Kremlin, justifying the deployment of TNWs in terms of the military activity carried out by NATO members near the borders of the so-called 'Union State', is once again resorting to the 'nuclear bogeyman'. In Russian thinking, this is meant to encourage the West to negotiate with Moscow on ending or freezing the war with Ukraine.
- The revelation of the significant financial losses the Ukrainian defence ministry has suffered as a result of the machinations involved in purchasing weapons and military equipment shows that during the first phase of the invasion, the government failed to ensure the effective supervision of its contractors. The need to support the army quickly was exploited to embezzle huge sums in the deals struck with foreign companies. Only after a year of unfavourable contracts did the government decide to transfer the defence procurement procedure to a single body, the Defence Procurement Agency. However, its effectiveness will depend on strict adherence to purchasing procedures, and on the steps which the services responsible for the country's economic security take in future. The agency is not functioning perfectly, as evidenced by the fact that the defence ministry has also demanded reimbursement from it in two cases for unfulfilled contracts amounting to 131.5 million hryvnias ($3.5 million).