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Russian volunteers destabilise the Belgorod oblast of Russia. Day 463 of the war

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Russian volunteer formations fighting on the side of Ukraine are continuing a psychological sabotage operation to confirm that resistance to the regime is growing in Russia. On 31 May, a spokesman for the Free Russia Legion reported that "between 500 and 1000 people" who are exclusively Russian citizens are fighting in its ranks. The formation is said to have a large military capability, and is armed with mortars, portable anti-tank systems, drones and armoured vehicles. On 1 June, the Russian Volunteer Corps and the Free Russia Legion announced that they were continuing a sabotage operation on Russian territory in the area of the town of Shebekino (located about 10 km from the border), which was also targeted by artillery as support fire. The Russian defence ministry reported that an attack by two infantry companies reinforced with tanks had been repulsed. The volunteers' actions caused panic among the local population, and the local authorities made chaotic attempts to evacuate the town's residents.

Oleksiy Danilov, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, said that the Russians have every right to fight back against Putin's regime, and that their armed activity will increase. In turn, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov announced that he saw no danger to citizens from the attack, and considered that the Defence Ministry's actions to repel it had been successful. He added that President Vladimir Putin was receiving information "directly" about what was happening, and had no plans to limit his activity.

On 30 May, the Russians blew up two roads at the junction of Ukraine's border with the Russian Federation and Belarus. This was confirmed a day later by Ukrainian Border Service spokesman Andriy Demchenko, who indicated that the destruction of roads in the border region was intended to hinder potential operations by the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

On the same day, Russian sources reported a drone attack on the outskirts of Moscow. The Russian air defence was said to have shot down all the attacking drones (initially the media reported that there were 10 of them, but later the defence ministry stated there had been 8), but three sites were said to have suffered damage from falling debris. The Kremlin saw this as an attack by Ukraine in revenge for the invaders' claimed destruction on 28 May of the military intelligence headquarters (HUR) in Kyiv (HUR chief Kyrylo Budanov declared that there would be a "painful response" to the Russians). On 2 June, the Russians reported Ukrainian drone attacks on infrastructure in the Kursk and Smolensk oblasts.

The invaders are continuing their attacks using missiles and kamikaze drones, with Kyiv as the main target. The Ukrainian side invariably declares that it has repelled all the aerial

assaults on the city and Kyiv oblast and confirms only a few hits in other areas of the country. According to the Air Force Command, on 30 May the defenders destroyed 29 out of 31 attacking Shahed-136/131 drones; on 1 June 10 out of 12 missiles (including seven Iskander-M ballistic missiles and three Iskander-K cruise missiles); and on 2 June 15 Kh-101/Ch-555 cruise missiles and 21 Shahed-136/131 drones. There was damage to critical and civilian infrastructure in and around Kyiv (in up to six areas of the city on 30 May). Casualties were also reported (with the highest number of casualties – three dead and 11 injured – on 1 June), with the human losses thought to have been caused by falling debris. In Kyiv, there were arrests of several people who posted footage of attacks on the city (including a particularly drastic one from the daytime attack on 1 June, which shows a PAC-3 CRI missile from the Patriot system striking between moving cars). Air Force Headquarters has once again appealed to the public not to record or publish such videos, stressing that they provide support to the enemy.

Outside Kyiv, the main target of Russian missile attacks was the Ukrainian forces' hinterland in the Kharkiv oblast. The most serious in terms of impact occurred on the night of 1 June in the industrial area of Kharkiv, where defenders confirmed strikes by two missiles from S-300 systems and significant damage. Russian artillery and aviation remain active along the contact lines and in the border areas. Kherson, Nikopol and Ochakiv remain the main targets of attacks outside the combat areas, being shelled and bombed several times a day. On 30 May, Ukrainian forces struck the invaders' hinterland in occupied Melitopol (twice) and Mykhailivka with rockets.

The main burden of fighting has shifted to the area around Marinka. The town and its surroundings account for half of the clashes recorded by the Ukrainian General Staff (12-13 per day), although this number is still relatively small compared to the previous period of intense fighting for Bakhmut and around the area of Avdiivka (21 to 27 clashes per day were recorded between 29 May and 1 June in general in all directions). The Russians are said to be increasingly active at the junction of Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts (the towns of Krokhmalne, Kuzemivka, Novoselivske and Stelmakhivka), where 11 clashes took place on 1 June. The defenders have announced that all hostile attacks were repulsed, but the situation northeast of Kupiansk, where the invading forces had been expected to approach the town, remains unclear. There were sporadic Russian attacks in the areas of Avdiivka and Bakhmut (Bila Hora, Orikhovo-Vasylivka) and on the border of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (Bilohorivka in Luhansk oblast, and Spirne). According to Ukrainian sources, the enemy has not attacked these areas at all for one or two days. On 1 June the commander of the Ukrainian Land Forces, General Oleksandr Syrski, confirmed that the defenders had halted their offensive operations in the Bakhmut area (as previously reported by deputy defence minister Hanna Malar). At the same time, he reported that the area around the town has still not yet been pacified, as the attackers have increased the intensity of their artillery shelling.

On 31 May, the Pentagon announced a new $300m military support package. It included additional missiles for Patriot launchers, AIM-7 missiles for ground-based air defence systems, Avenger short-range anti-aircraft systems and Stinger man-portable air-defence systems, additional GMLRS guided missiles for HIMARS launchers, 155-mm and 105-mm calibre artillery and 105-mm tank ammunition, airborne precision-guided munitions (most likely JDAM bombs), 127-mm Zuni airborne unguided missiles, UAV ammunition (for the

first time), AT4 anti-tank grenade launchers and around 30 million small arms cartridges. Everything comes from the US Army's stockpile, which means it could be sent to Ukraine within the coming weeks. On 30 May, Italian defence minister Guido Crosetto announced his country was preparing a new military support package for Kyiv, the seventh of its kind. According to Italian media, it could include more SAMP/T air defence systems or other armaments in this category.

On 1 June, the US Department of Defense announced it would purchase Starlink terminals and satellite communications services from SpaceX for the Ukrainian Army. These were listed in the December 2022 support package as part of the long-term assistance funded under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). In addition, the Pentagon signed a contract worth more than $118 million with Global Military Products Inc. for the purchase and delivery to Ukraine of Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, which the US company will procure from Jordan; the contract is scheduled to be completed by 30 May 2024. Previously the German manufacturer Quantum-Systems GmbH had delivered two batches of these guns to the Ukrainian army (33 in August 2022 and 105 in January 2023).

On 30 May, defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov reported that Ukraine needs 120 fighters, most of which should be F-16s. He also assumes that his country will acquire Eurofighter and Gripen fighters from European partners, although in contrast he does not expect to receive French Rafals. Earlier, representatives of the Ukrainian Air Force said they expected to receive 48 aircraft.

On 29 May, amendments were made to the Russian law 'On Martial Law'. The possibility of "forced and controlled resettlement of citizens from the territory where martial law is in force to areas where martial law has not been imposed" was legalised. The possibility of referendums and elections to state and local administrative bodies was also provided for. The decision to hold elections will be taken by the Central Election Commission after consultation with the Ministry of Defence and the Federal Security Service. On 30 May, Russian prime minister Mikhail Mishustin announced that almost 1.5 million people residing in territories 'annexed to Russia' had received Russian passports since October 2022.

On 31 May, a bill allowing people with criminal records to undertake contract military service was submitted to the Russian parliament. Those recruited will have their sentences dismissed or their criminal records expunged. Those convicted of sexual offences against minors, as well as treason, terrorism and extremism, will still not be allowed to enlist in the military.

The Wagner Group continues to recruit mercenaries using profiles on social networks Facebook and Twitter. On 31 May, the UK-based disinformation research company Logically came across job offers from the Wagner Group targeting doctors, drone operators and psychologists for participation in warfare, in Ukraine and other countries. These have received nearly 120,000 hits over the past 10 months on both social networks. The posts are published in dozens of languages, including French and Spanish. Declared contract salaries are around €2800 per month and include medical care.

On 30 May, the Security Service of Ukraine called on owners of street surveillance cameras to stop online transmissions from their devices, and on citizens to report any such activity if they notice it online. The aim is to prevent Russian hackers from monitoring the situation in

public places and verifying the effectiveness of rocket fire. It was recalled that publishing any material documenting the actions of the Armed Forces and the effects of shelling is punishable by up to 12 years' imprisonment.

On 30 May, the Ukrainian parliament reduced the age limit for citizens subject to conscription from 27 to 25 at the request of the defence ministry. As regular conscription is suspended during martial law, it has not been possible to send draftees to the front.

Commentary

- The renewed sabotage in Russia's border regions has proven to be an effective way of fuelling war panic and demonstrating that the Russian Armed Forces are incapable of preventing further such incidents. The confused local authorities, fearing an incursion by larger forces, have been making inconsistent decisions about evacuating the border towns. Reports of tension in the border regions are appearing in Russian media, and are raising concerns about the possibility of the war spilling over into Russian territory. The government in Moscow is minimising the significance of the armed incursions, stressing that they are 'terrorist' in nature and targeted at civilians; this allows Russian propaganda to portray the country as a 'victim' of the war caused by Kyiv. The Ukrainian side will continue to support the Russian volunteer formations, and to spread reports that armed resistance by the Russian population is growing.