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The Belgorod syndrome: the Ukrainian incursion reveals the weakness of the Russian regime

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A Ukrainian subversive and psychological operation has been ongoing on the territory of the Belgorod oblast since 22 May. It is mainly being carried out by Russian volunteer troops of the 'Free Russia' Legion and the Russian Volunteer Corps, who oppose the Putin regime and are subordinate to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Their operational tactics include carrying out raids several kilometres deep into Russia, destroying border posts and taking temporary control of small towns.

The FSB border service has been unable to respond to the armed incidents and its officers have abandoned their border posts, while the armed forces have so far refrained from deploying military units to the area. The local authorities have announced a rapid evacuation of border towns, carried it out on a limited scale, and focused on propaganda activities. Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov has taken personal charge of the distribution of humanitarian aid, making visits to aid centres and meeting residents. Material support from other federal entities has begun to flow into the region. On 6 June the oblast was visited by Andrei Turchak, Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council and a senior member of the ruling United Russia party.

According to official statements from the Russian defence ministry, all the armed groups that entered the territory of Belgorod oblast have now been crushed. No decision to impose martial law in the area was taken. The state media have kept silent about the involvement of Russians fighting on the Ukrainian side. They have accused Ukrainian nationalists and foreign mercenaries (mainly Poles) of carrying out these raids. In contrast, the Ukrainian media have portrayed the operations of the Russian regime's opponents as a seedbed of popular revolt in the Russian Federation, which signals the possibility of a civil war.

Commentary

- This successful subversive campaign by Russian volunteers on Russian territory follows similar operations that took place in March and April. However, the current one has been carried out on a larger scale than before: groups of several dozen people armed with anti-tank launchers have been moving around in armoured vehicles. Even if these actions have little military significance, they have revealed the weakness of the Russian forces responsible for protecting the border and, most importantly, their limited ability to respond quickly to such incidents. The Russian Armed Forces have so far been unable to prevent further incidents of this kind, while the FSB border service has failed to protect

the state border effectively. The plan to reinforce the protection of the border with people's militia units formed *ad hoc* by the oblast authorities has also failed. The local government, confused by the attacks and fearing an incursion by larger forces, has only taken emergency measures to ensure the safety of the civilian population, such as ordering a rapid evacuation; this has only added to the chaos. Some residents had to leave the areas affected by the fighting and organise mutual aid on their own.

- In terms of psychological warfare, the operation has deepened the war panic among the local population and undermined the authority of the government, which has been unable to ensure security. Reports of the tense situation in the border oblasts and the ineffective response of the security services have circulated in the Russian media space, raising concerns about the possible spillover of the war into Russian territory. The atmosphere of tension has been compounded by ongoing artillery shelling and airstrikes on Russian territory, as well as the spread of rumours on social networks about a Ukrainian advance on the oblast's capital city of Belgorod. Numerous accounts can be found in the Russian media and social networks describing the population's panic, flight and looting. Panic and disillusionment (the feeling of being left without help) have been growing especially, in local communities in the regions that have experienced attacks. Criticism has mainly been levelled at the attitude of the Russian armed forces, whose competence has been called into question. There is also a growing distrust of official communiqués, as well as a sense of isolation and the absence of adequate support from state institutions.
- The government in Moscow, as well as state propaganda, have played down the significance of these subversive operations, insisting that they are 'terrorist' and aimed at the civilian population. This allows the propaganda to portray Russia as a 'victim' of the war which Kyiv allegedly unleashed with the support of the West, and to seek to damage Ukraine's image in the international arena. The Russian government has used the incursion of foreign forces into Russian territory to accuse Kyiv and the West of seeking to 'annihilate the Russian people', while also attempting to rally society around the Kremlin and the war. Its silence on the participation of Russians in the cross-border raids most likely stems from the Kremlin's fear of confirming that the idea of armed struggle against Vladimir Putin's regime has its active supporters in Russia, which could set a 'bad example' for its other opponents. In order to avoid panic and an escalation of discontent with the government's actions, the media have been projecting the reassuring narrative that the state services are in control of the situation, and that society is calm and ready to defend the country.
- If the Ukrainian incursion continues and extends to all the border oblasts (Kursk, Bryansk and Belgorod), it will increasingly contribute to the deterioration of public sentiment. It will undermine confidence in the government by exposing its ineptitude, spreading the thesis of growing armed resistance ('Russian guerrillas') in Russia and, as part of Ukrainian disinformation, signalling the possibility that anti-Putin 'people's republics' could be set up in the seized territories. However, this will not cause a rapid drop in pro-war sentiments: for parts of the population, the sense of imminent danger gives credence to the thesis promoted by the Kremlin that the West, together with Ukraine, are out to destroy Russia; therefore, many are clamouring for victory in the war. Reported support for the war effort has so far been higher in the border oblasts than in the country as a

whole. Although the oblast authorities have not faced explicit criticism from the population as yet, a personnel reshuffle at this level cannot be ruled out as the situation continues to deteriorate and public sentiment worsens.

- It is conceivable that the Kremlin might decide to enlist mercenary formations to improve security in the border regions, as the Russian army and security forces are both suffering from a shortage of reserves. Yevgeny Prigozhin, a staunch critic of the defence ministry, has expressed his interest in such a solution. On 5 June, he issued an ultimatum of sorts to the command of the Russian Armed Forces, warning that if they failed to bring order to the Belgorod region and ensure the safety of its residents within two weeks, then his own troops would take care of it. The Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has also made a direct offer to Putin on how to deal with the situation, proposing to use Chechen forces to defend the border areas.