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The commanders of Mariupol's defence return to Ukraine. Day 502 of the war

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Ukrainian troops are continuing their offensive operations on the Zaporizhzhia front. In recent days, fighting has been concentrated around the village of Robotyne, where subunits of the 47th and 65th Mechanised Brigades have been attempting for over a month to push through the defence line of the Russian 42nd Motorised Rifles Division. The Ukrainians have also failed to make any significant progress south of Velyka Novosilka; in recent days the focus of their advance has been in the area of Pryyutne. According to Russian sources, the attackers are mainly using small infantry assault groups (of platoon-company strength) in these directions, supported by fire from single tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. Heavy fighting is taking place at Bakhmut, where Ukrainian troops are attacking the flanks of an extended Russian grouping; however, they have met tough resistance there, and have not broken through the enemy positions. The key sections of the assault are the Kurdiumivka-Andriivka-Klishchiivka belt and the village of Berkhivka (south and north of Bakhmut respectively).

The invaders are holding the initiative on a section of the front stretching from the border to the River Donets (the borderlands of Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts). Troops from the 1st Armoured Army, the 11th Army Corps, the 2nd, 20th and 41st Armies and airborne army groupings are attacking Ukrainian positions in an attempt to take complete control over the Kupiansk-Svatove road and to reach the line of the Zherebets river from Makiivka to its mouth. The heaviest fighting in recent days took place in the vicinity of the villages of Novoselivske and Torske and in the forests by the Donets, but it did not result in any significant field gains for the Russians. They also unsuccessfully attacked the defenders' positions in the Donbas, primarily in Marinka and around Avdiivka.

Over the past four days, the intensity of Russian attacks on targets located deeper inside Ukraine has decreased. On the night of 7–8 July, anti-aircraft defences claimed to have shot down five Shahed 136/131 drones, but several others hit unknown targets located in Dnipropetrovsk and Kirovohrad oblasts. On the night of 10–11 July, the Russians launched 28 drones, 26 of which were shot down by the Ukrainians. The main target of the attack was the grain port in Odesa, where two drones hit administrative buildings (out of the 24 which targeted the area); shrapnel set fire to the grain terminals. According to local sources, the Russians also used S-300 missiles to strike Zaporizhzhia (7 July) and Mykolaiv (10 July). At the same time, no attacks with ballistic and cruise missiles were reported. Due to the increasing activity of Russian artillery, mortars and sabotage groups, on 10 July the authorities in Sumy oblast decided to forcibly evacuate the civilian population within a five-

kilometre zone by the border.

On 7 July, the US announced another $800 million military support package for Ukraine. It included additional munitions for Patriot air defense systems, more AIM-7 Sparrow for use in air defence systems, Stinger man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), 31 155mm Howitzers (most likely M777s), 155mm artillery rounds, including DPICM (dual-purpose improved conventional munition), and 105mm artillery rounds, 32 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and 32 Stryker armoured personnel carriers, mine clearing equipment, TOW and Javelin anti-tank guided missiles and other anti-tank grenade launchers, precision aerial munitions (JDAMs), Penguin unmanned aerial systems, 27 tactical vehicles to recover equipment, 10 tactical vehicles to tow and haul equipment, Demolitions munitions and systems for obstacle clearing (most likely M58 MICLIC extended charges), small arms and over 28 million rounds of small arms ammunition and grenades, spare parts and other field equipment. On the same day, the UK announced that it would supply Kyiv with 17 specialist firefighting vehicles which had previously belonged to its air force.

On 9 July, the US-based *Wall Street Journal* reported that Poland had transferred around a dozen attack helicopters from the Mi-24 family to Ukraine in recent weeks.

On 10 July, the Australian prime minister announced that from October an E-7A Wedgetail AEW&C (airborne early warning and control) aircraft would be deployed to Germany for a period of about six months. The aircraft and up to 100 crew & technical personnel are expected to help protect a vital gateway of international humanitarian and military assistance to Ukraine. On the same day, the CEO of Germany's Rheinmetall stated in an interview with CNN that his company will open repair and maintenance facilities in Ukraine within 12 weeks. These are to be used to maintain the operability of the heavy equipment produced by Rheinmetall (including Leopard 2 tanks and PzH2000 howitzers) donated to Kyiv by a number of countries. In addition, he declared that his company would raise the annual number of artillery shells produced from 100,000 to 600,000 next year, and that a significant part of this additional production could be used to supply Ukraine.

On 11 July, German defence minister Boris Pistorius announced that Germany is preparing another military aid package for Ukraine worth almost €700 million. Its details are to be presented at the NATO summit in Vilnius (11–12 July), but German media have reported that it will include two additional Patriot launchers, 40 Marder 1A3 infantry fighting vehicles, 25 Leopard 1A5 tanks, five Bergepanzer 2 armoured recovery vehicle, 25,000 155-mm artillery shells (including 5000 smoke shells), drone detection and drone protection package, Luna unmanned aerial systems, and sapper & medical equipment. On the same day, French president Emmanuel Macron reiterated his pledge to hand over SCALP-EG airborne cruise missiles (the French name for Storm Shadow missiles) to Kyiv.

A two-day NATO summit in Vilnius began on 11 July, where arrangements concerning Ukraine will be made. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed confidence that the event would adopt a "positive wording" on the country's NATO membership. He recalled that at the NATO ministerial meeting in Oslo in May this year, he had proposed that the requirement for Ukraine to implement the Membership Action Plan (MAP) be lifted, given how much Kyiv had moved towards the Alliance's standards to date. He confirmed that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky would arrive in Vilnius later in the evening and

would attend the inaugural meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council the next day.

One of the outcomes of Zelensky's visit to Turkey on 8 July was the release from internment of five commanders of the defence of Mariupol who had served in the Azov regiment. They were exchanged for the pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk at the end of September 2022, then handed over to the Turkish authorities and given personal security guarantees by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It had been agreed with Russia that they would not return to Ukraine until the end of the war. Zelensky thanked the Turkish president for "helping to release" the soldiers. The Azov regiment commander Denys Prokopenko stated that all five would soon return to the frontline. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov expressed dissatisfaction over the release of the former prisoners of war, and accused Ukraine and Turkey of breaking the agreement that had been reached. He expressed disappointment that Moscow had not been informed of the Turkish government's change of position. He acknowledged that Ankara had acted under pressure from NATO countries, and had been forced by them to make a gesture in support of Kyiv just before the start of the summit in Vilnius.

On 8 July, the Ukrainian president appointed Oleksandr Pivnenko as the new commander of the National Guard; he is an officer with extensive combat experience, having participated in battles around Kharkiv and Bakhmut. The head of the Ukrainian Interior Ministry, Ihor Klymenko, stressed that the new commander should focus on continuing the organisation and training of the assault brigades, the so-called Offensive Guard.

On 9 July, the minister for strategic industries Oleksandr Kamyshin stated that the Ukrainian defence industry was still struggling to increase its production of artillery munitions. He added that the government is striving to make Ukraine a major arms exporter again. He indicated that the rate of production of Stugna-P anti-tank systems had increased, and that the production of tanks and armoured vehicles would rise significantly within the next three to six months. He also reported that during a visit to Turkey on 8 July, he had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Industry and Technology there to develop production capacity for various types of drones. At the same time, he added that – after a delay of many years – the construction of plants to produce Bayraktar drones had started in Ukraine.

On 10 July, a Kremlin spokesman confirmed that a meeting had taken place on 29 June between Vladimir Putin and a group of 35 members of the Wagner Group's command staff, which Yevgeny Prigozhin also attended. The president heard their explanation of the 'mutiny', and offered them further opportunities for employment and "use in combat". Wagner issued a one-sentence statement insisting that they remained loyal to Putin.

Commentary

- On the Zaporizhzhia front, the Ukrainians are consistently carrying out offensive operations by attacking the Russians with small assault subunits supported by armoured weapons. It seems that the Ukrainian command's main objective at this stage of the operation is not to advance at all costs, but to systematically weaken the enemy's infantry units on the front line and destroy their artillery, command posts and logistics. Using the experience of last year's offensive in the Kherson oblast, the Ukrainians will then aim to attack the weakened enemy at a more convenient time and place. At present

the Russian grouping is made up of four armies (the 58th, 35th, 5th and 36th) stretched out along a front of more than 150 km (from Vasylivka to Vuhledar); it does not have any strong reserves that could launch a counter-attack if the Ukrainians break through the front. At this time the Russian reserves on the Zaporizhzhia front consist of several brigades, a significant number of which are already in the combat zone.

- The American decision to transfer DPICM artillery cluster munitions to Kyiv has caused controversy among Western countries. Neither the US, Ukraine or Russia are signatories to the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), to which a number of Alliance countries are party. President Joe Biden noted that the decision was prompted by shortages of artillery shells on both the Ukrainian and US sides. The delivery of DPICMs will only continue until the Pentagon replenishes its stockpile of unitary warhead artillery munitions and can send more of them to Ukraine; that process could take several months. A single 155-mm DPICM artillery cluster shell contains 88 submunitions, which can be dispersed over an area of approximately 200 metres and are capable of area-combatting infantry and armoured targets (penetrating armour up to 4 cm in thickness).
- The release of the Azov regiment's soldiers interned in Turkey should be seen as a major success for the Ukrainian president, who has shown that he is able to break the secret agreements with Russia on the detention of prisoners of war. Gaining the personal support of President Erdoğan, who has hitherto conducted an assertive policy towards Moscow, was crucial in this matter. Domestically, Zelensky has strengthened his image as an effective politician who cares about the fate of every Ukrainian soldier.

