

Russia shells Ukrainian ports on the Danube. Day 516 of the war

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The Russians have carried out further attacks on the Odesa area. On 24 July, Shahed-136 kamikaze drones struck the port of Reni, located on the mouth of the Danube at the border with Romania and Moldova; six Romanian ships were there at the time of the attack. Three grain stores were destroyed and seven people were injured. According to the local authorities 15 drones attacked the port, while the Odesa military administration reported that three of them had been shot down. After midnight on 23 July, the invaders used a total of 19 missiles (2 Iskander-M ballistic missiles and 17 cruise missiles: 5 Oniks, 5 Iskander-Ks, 4 Kalibrs and 3 Kh-22s) to attack Odesa and the surrounding area; the defenders claimed to have shot down 9 (all the Iskander-Ks and Kalibrs). It is likely that shards from Russian missiles and/or Ukrainian air defence missiles fell on the historic city centre, damaging between 25 and 29 buildings, including the Transfiguration Cathedral (Spaso-Preobrazhensky). One person was killed and around 20 injured. The Ukrainian side suggested that one of the Kh-22 missiles had hit the centre of Odesa, emphasising the imprecision of this type of missile: however, the small scale of the damage and its dispersion rule out the possibility that this particular weapon had hit there. On 21 July, seven Russian missiles struck infrastructure in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi; the Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that the attackers had used four Oniks cruise missiles "somewhere south of the centre of the region".

On 22 July, Russian missiles from S-300 systems hit targets in Kramatorsk and Kostiantynivka, as well as Blahodativka in the Kupiansk area (the Ukrainian General Staff confirmed four missile strikes); on 23 July Zaporizhzhia and its surroundings were struck (four missiles landed there). On 24 July, the General Staff reported a further missile strike, but gave no details. On 22 July, Shahed-136/131 drones attacked the Kirovohrad oblast, with an explosion in Kropyvnytskyi. However, the Ukrainian Air Force Command declared that all five drones used by the invaders had been shot down. On 25 July, more kamikaze drones attacked Kyiv (as usual, the local administration reported that all of them had been neutralised) as well as the Cherkasy and Zhytomyr oblasts; an infrastructure facility in the latter was destroyed. According to the Air Force Command, the defenders shot down five of the 10 drones used by the Russians.

On 22 July, Ukraine attacked a fuel and ammunition depot in the Oktiabske area of occupied Crimea. Depending on sources, either drones or Storm Shadow/SCALP cruise missiles were used to carry out the operation. Two days later, Ukrainian drones targeted an ammunition depot in the area of the town of Dzhankoi (the Ukrainians used a total of 17

drones in their attack on Crimea on 24 July). The local authorities ordered the evacuation of the population in a zone 5 km from the warehouse, and in addition, traffic on the road and rail route between Dzhankoi and Simferopol was halted for several hours. On the morning of 24 July, Moscow was also the target of another drone attack.

Ukrainian forces have pushed the Russians out of some positions south-west of Bakhmut, between the Donets-Donbas canal and Klishchiivka (according to some sources, the Ukrainians occupied the western outskirts of this village) and Andriivka. In contrast, the Russian counter-attacks in the area and their subsequent attempts to advance north-west of Bakhmut (in the vicinity of Avdiivka and Marinka) failed to yield results. Attacks by both sides west of Kreminna and in the areas of the Russian bridgeheads on the west bank of the Zherebets river (on the border of Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts) also failed to bring about any significant changes. Subsequent Ukrainian attacks and Russian counter-attacks in the south were also unsuccessful, although on 25 July the Ukrainian General Staff reported success near the village of Staromayorske south of Velyka Novosilka. On 24 July, Ukraine's deputy defence minister Hanna Maliar summarised the progress of Ukrainian operations over the previous week: in the south, the defenders recaptured a further 12 km² of territory, and 4 km² in the area of Bakhmut. This increased the size of the territories liberated since the start of the counter-offensive to 192 km² and 35 km² respectively.

According to press reports, on 25 July the US is expected to announce its 43rd military support package to Kyiv, worth \$400 million. It will include 32 Stryker wheeled armoured personnel carriers, missiles for HIMARS and NASAMS systems (Reuters also mentioned Patriot systems), Stinger and Javelin guided missiles (as well as TOWs, according to Reuters), Hydra-70 air-to-ground missiles, artillery and gunfire ammunition, and Hornet miniature reconnaissance drones. The package has been prepared from the US presidential administration's Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) fund, meaning that it will consist of equipment from the Pentagon's stockpile. It should arrive in Ukraine in the coming weeks.

On 24 July, the Lithuanian defence ministry announced that Vilnius had implemented a long-term plan for Ukraine's military support. Between 2024 and 2026, €200 million is to be allocated to purchase arms and military equipment, to refurbish them on Lithuanian territory, and to prepare personnel and financial contributions towards support funds. On the same day, the Spanish defence ministry announced it would send Ukraine the previously announced four Leopard 2A4 tanks (it has delivered six tanks of this type so far) and 10 TOA M-113 tracked transporters (three of which are to go to the Ukrainian State Border Service), as well as a dozen different types of vehicles for the army and other uniformed services. On 22 July, Polish defence minister Mariusz Błaszczak announced that the first two Leopard tanks had arrived at the Bumar-Łabędy Machine-Building Plant in Gliwice from Ukraine for overhaul. Two days later a spokesman for the German defence ministry, Lieutenant Colonel Mitko Müller, confirmed that an agreement had been reached to launch a repair centre in Poland for the German armaments being used by the Ukrainian army; he indicated that Leopard 2A4 tanks could be overhauled in Gliwice. On 21 July, the Bulgarian parliament voted to supply Kyiv with a batch of wheeled armoured personnel carriers (most likely post-Soviet BTR-60s) from the stock of the Bulgarian interior ministry. The Bulgarian MPs also suggested that transporter crews could be trained in the country.

On 24 July, independent Belarusian media estimated that there were between 3450 and 3650 Wagner troops based at a field camp near Asipovichy (on 22 July, the Ukrainian border service said that up to 5000 of the mercenaries were now in Belarus). Since 11 July, 10 car columns of around 700 vehicles have arrived in the town of Tsel. On 25 July, the head of the Belarusian Interior Ministry, Ivan Kubrakou, stated during a meeting with the Wagner troops' 'commanders' that "in view of the difficult situation near the borders" it was particularly important to remain ready to respond to possible challenges and threats. According to the minister, the Wagner forces' experience is of great importance to "ensure security and order" in Belarus.

On 21 July, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the launch of a comprehensive review of the work of the military commissions, with the focus on uncovering corruption. The head of state has become involved in response to a scandal in Odesa, where the head of the local military commission Yevhen Borisov was detained on 22 July. The State Bureau of Investigation has charged him with accepting a 'financial benefit' of 188 million hryvnias (about \$5 million) for issuing discharge documents from military service, among other things. The head of the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, Oleksandr Novikov, announced that the review would cover not only the heads of the military commissions, but also their families.

On 24 July, President Vladimir Putin signed amendments to the law on military duty and military service; these will raise the upper age limit for joining the reserve of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, and are thus intended to guarantee an increase in mobilisation potential. The rise in the age limit applies to citizens holding the ranks of private (from 35 to 40 years), non-commissioned officer (from 45 to 50 years) and ensign (from 50 to 55 years). Senior officers are to remain in the reserve until the age of 65, and junior officers until age 60. A day later, the Russian parliament passed another amendment to the law establishing that conscription will apply to persons aged between 18 and 30 (previously the upper age limit had been 27). Both amendments will come into force on 1 January 2024. It was stipulated that conscripts turning 27 this year will be transferred to the reserves, and will not be called up for military service.

Commentary

- Russia's continued strikes on the transshipment infrastructure in the Odesa region, as well as its first attacks on Ukraine's Danube ports, confirm that it is seeking to completely prevent Ukraine from exporting grain via the sea route. Depriving Kyiv of its only export route would make Ukraine fully dependent on its land-based neighbours in the EU. Moscow's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative signals that it not only wants to cause further impediments to Ukraine's economy, but it is also working to deepen reluctance in the neighbouring countries to keep support Ukraine.
- The changes to the law on military duty and military service should not be seen as an attempt to immediately increase the size of the Russian Armed Forces or the so-called 'other troops': both of these changes will only come into force from the beginning of next year, and will only be gradually implemented until 2028. The changes have come in response to the work (accelerated since the war started) on adapting the conscription system to the structure of Russian society, something which had not previously been a

priority. The measures taken indicate not only the ageing of the Russian population, but also a shift in the upper limit of labour force participation (in which Russia is just part of a broader global trend). In the context of the ongoing war, Moscow still has significant mobilisation resources at its disposal, which it can deploy without the need to changing the legal situation.

- Kyiv, on the other hand, is increasingly struggling to replenish its personnel. In the summer of 2022, the defence force structures (covering all Ukrainian military formations) were expanded to a record 1 million soldiers (including 700,000 in the Ukrainian Armed Forces). However it may not be possible to maintain this in the long term, as indicated both by the decision to conduct a comprehensive review of the military commissions and by the cases disclosed of people evading service and trying to leave the country illegally.

