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Ukrainian drones attack Pskov airfield. Day 554 of the war

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On 30 August, the Ukrainians carried out their largest drone attack on Russian territory to date, while also expanding their list of targets to include Pskov airfield, which lies almost 700km north of the country's border (the 334th Transport Aviation Regiment is based there). Satellite imagery confirmed Russian reports of the destruction of two Il-76 transport aircraft and damage to a further two, while Ukrainian military intelligence in turn reported the destruction of four and damage to "several more" aircraft of this type; its head General Kyrylo Budanov announced that the attack on Pskov was launched from Russian territory. According to Russian reports, the Ukrainians allegedly used more than 20 drones in the attack.

It is very likely that fragments of a downed drone set fire to the premises of the Bryansk plant of Kriemny EL, one of Russia's largest manufacturers of microelectronics, including components used in the Iskander and Pantsir systems. In addition, Ukrainian attacks targeted the city of Moscow and the Moscow, Kaluga, Oryol, Ryazan and Tula oblasts, but no damage was reported; according to the Russian Federation, all the drones were shot down or overpowered by electronic warfare means. Also, a failed surface drone attack was reported from Sevastopol. Ukrainian drone attacks carried out on the evening of 30 August, once again on Bryansk and Feodosia in the Crimea, the following day on Moscow and Bryansk, and on 1 September in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts, were unsuccessful as well. However, the attack on the Moscow suburb of Lubiertsy on 1 September was successful; a fire, most likely caused by a downed drone, broke out on the premises of another Russian microelectronics manufacturer, Tomilinskiy Elektronnyy Zavod. On 31 August, the BBC calculated that the Ukrainians had carried out a total of 190 drone attacks (with both UAVs and surface units) on Russian territory and occupied Crimea since the start of the year.

On 30 August, the Russians launched another massive attack on Ukraine using missiles and drones. According to a report from the Ukrainian General Staff, the invaders used a total of 31 missiles, and the Air Force Command reported that all 28 Kh-101/Kh-55/Kh-555 cruise missiles and 15 of 16 Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones were shot down. Most of them (over 20 missiles and drones) were destroyed over Kyiv, but the impact of one of the missiles caused a massive explosion in the right-bank area of the city. Official reports say two people were killed and three injured as a result of falling shrapnel in the capital, and damage was reported in two districts. Odessa oblast was also targeted (with Kalibr missiles, according to the local administration); it was reported that eight enemy missiles were neutralised there. Destruction of infrastructure was also reported in Donetsk (at Rivne near Myrnohrad) and Zhytomyr oblasts. On the night of 1 September, Russian Kalibr missiles struck Vinnytsia oblast (according to the Air Force Command, one was shot down

and another hit a factory, injuring three people); Ukrainian sources also reported explosions in the Zhytomyr oblast.

In the attacks which Ukrainian troops launched on 26–29 August towards the village of Verbove, south of Orikhiv, they very probably overran the first belt of fortifications of the enemy's first line of defence in Zaporizhzhia oblast. In the area of Verbove, the Russians moved their defences to the second belt (2–3 km south and east of the first), of which the western outskirts of this town are a component; according to the Ukrainian General Staff, their counterattacks failed. Ukrainian forces also reportedly reached the first belt of enemy fortifications south-east of the village of Robotyne; this was an attempt to bypass this village, which the Ukrainians partly control, and head towards Novoprokopivka, which lies south of it. If these reports are confirmed, this would be the first time since the start of the southern offensive (4 June) that Ukrainian troops had reached and broken through a fortified Russian defence line.

The intensity of the clashes in the remaining combat areas is still limited, and they have not resulted in any terrain changing hands. However, Both sides stepped up their sabotage activities in Kherson oblast: the Ukrainians made another attempt to establish a bridgehead on the left bank of the River Dnieper near the Antonivsky Bridge (a sabotage and reconnaissance group is being maintained there), while the Russians landed on the island of Nestryha, which lies off the right bank.

On 29 August, the Pentagon announced another military aid package for Ukraine, this one worth $250 million. The US Army's resources (under the Presidential Drawdown Authority, PDA) are to provide AIM-9M Sidewinder short-range air-to-air missiles as anti-aircraft missiles (most likely for NASAMS systems), GMLRS guided missiles for HIMARS launchers, 105-mm and 155-mm artillery munitions, Javelin anti-tank guided missile launchers and 'other anti-tank systems' including missiles, TOW anti-tank guided missiles, 70-mm Hydra-70 airborne unguided missiles, more than 3 million units of small-arms ammunition and hand grenades, and armoured medical evacuation vehicles & ambulances based on HMMWVs. The following day, the German Chancellery announced new deliveries to Kyiv: these will include 10 Leopard 1A5 tanks, a TRML-4D radar (for the IRIS-T air defence system), 16 Vector reconnaissance drones, four HX81 tank transporters and more than 13 million rounds of small-arms ammunition. In turn, on 31 August, the *Politico* website reported that the first 10 Abrams tanks will be sent to Ukraine in mid-September.

On 30 August, while summarising an informal meeting of EU defence ministers in Toledo, European Commission Vice-President Josep Borrell proposed increasing the number of Ukrainian servicemen being trained during 2023 from 30,000 to 40,000. As he put it, 25,000 soldiers have been prepared for the EU training mission so far, and the training of the remaining 5000 is expected to be completed in October. On the same day, the Ukrainian General Staff reported that more than 20,000 soldiers have so far been trained in the UK as part of the international Interflex mission organised by London; each man has received complete personal equipment (including summer and winter uniforms) from the organisers. Also on 30 August, Dutch defence minister Kajsa Ollongren announced that a letter of intent had been signed with Bucharest to provide training on F-16 fighter jets and maintain the aircraft at a centre in Romania. The following day, Kyiv confirmed that the first group of pilots set to start training on F-16s in Denmark had gone there.

On 31 August, Borrell announced that so far EU member states had transferred 224,000 artillery shells and almost 2300 missiles from their stocks to Ukraine. Slovakia's proposal to increase deliveries by upgrading its spent munitions is to be considered by the EU. Also to be discussed in Toledo was the question of a possible allocation of €20 billion (€5 billion per year) for Ukraine's defence between 2023 and 2027. At the same time, the eighth tranche of funds to purchase armaments for Ukraine (€500 million) was not passed due to opposition from Hungary.

Also on 31 August, President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the British arms company BAE Systems would open an office in Ukraine. Kyiv will sign a cooperation agreement with them on the placement of armaments production in Ukraine, as well as a framework agreement on cooperation in the fields of overhaul, the supply of spare parts, and the manufacture of the 105-mm L119 towed howitzer. On the same day, the general director of the Ukrainska Bronetekhnika company announced that the production of mortars has been increased and resumed at new locations. In total, the army and other uniformed formations have received more than 600 Ukrainian mortars of 60-mm, 82-mm and 120-mm calibres since the start of the year. Their costs were covered by the state budget and by funds donated by social organisations.

On the same day, Ukrainian military intelligence chief Kyrylo Budanov stated that the first nuclear warheads had been delivered to Belarus "a few days ago". Earlier, the Russians had given training in the use of Iskander launchers to soldiers there. In turn, the Security Service of Ukraine reported that since February 2022, more than 2000 people cooperating with Russian special services had been unmasked, and more than 300 of them had proved to be professionally trained agents.

As part of measures to curb abuses in the implementation of military procurement, the defence minister has appointed Arsen Zhumadilov to a three-year term as head of the Material Security Agency of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This body will be responsible for the procurement of all categories of supplies for the military except armaments and military equipment. Zhumadilov admitted that the institution, which was set up back in January, as yet "only exists on paper"; he said that the main challenges it faces, on top of rooting out corruption, include forecasting the procurement policy accurately and arranging the distribution of goods. The agency is expected to begin full-scale operations this autumn.

On 30 August, a meeting of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine discussed the operation of military medical commissions. It was decided to carry out a comprehensive review of the legitimacy of decisions declaring ineligibility for military service which may be related to corruption. On the basis of the results of this review, conclusions will also be drawn as to the criminal consequences for people who have left the country on the basis of falsified medical decisions. The government has not ruled out referring extradition requests to countries where such people can be identified. President Zelensky reported that the average price of a bribe for issuing falsified documents ranges from $3000 to $15,000.

Commentary

- The strike on Pskov airfield on 30 August confirms Ukraine's growing capability to attack targets deep inside Russian territory. The drones used have been built to the designs of Ukrainian engineers, and are mainly based on imported components (the plants in

Ukraine are *de facto* assembly facilities). These drone are mostly small-scale reconnaissance designs, identical to those available on the civilian market, and comparable to the types massively imported into Ukraine. However the manufacturers have also, in cooperation with external partners, been able to develop and produce several types of drones adapted to attacking targets with underslung ammunition. These range from the small R18 octocopter, with a range of 5 km, to drones with a range of several hundred kilometres; for example the HaKi-20, dubbed the 'Hunter Killer', can carry up to 15 kg of payload at a distance of up to 1000 km, and the UJ-22 Airborne can carry up to 20 kg at a distance of up to 800 km.

- The strike on the airport in Pskov is not the first to have been carried out so far from Ukraine's borders; in December 2022, the Engels Russian strategic air base in Saratov oblast was attacked. It confirms that Moscow continues to underestimate its opponent, and has not properly prepared its defences in places that have not been attacked before; one previous example of this was the surface drone attack on the Black Sea Fleet base in Novorossiysk in early August. However, the Ukrainians are finding it increasingly difficult to achieve the desired results in areas that have been regular targets of attacks, as can be seen in the almost daily repeated strikes on Crimea and the border regions of the Russian Federation, and in recent weeks Moscow itself. In contrast to the attack on Pskov, there has been no confirmation of the reports by the SBU and the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces of the successful kamikaze drone operations on 25 and 27 August against the barracks of the 126th Mechanised Brigade in Perevalne in Crimea and the military airfield near Kursk respectively, which they claimed caused significant damage.
- In the assault on Pskov, Russian aviation transport suffered losses for the first time since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The loss of four of its aircraft means a temporary reduction in the ability of the elite 76th Landing and Assault Squadron based at Pskov to transport its sub-units, for which the 334th Transport Aviation Regiment is responsible (it has 24 Il-76 aircraft at its disposal). It should be assumed that, in the event of an emergency, aircraft from units from the Asian part of the Russian Federation will be deployed to the city. In all likelihood, the Pskov regiment will be given priority in the technical modernisation of aviation transport, a process which has accelerated significantly since 24 February 2022. As part of the rearmament, which began in 2012, two modernised Il-76MD aircraft were handed over to service each year. Last year the Russian army received five of them, and three so far during 2023.
- In taking yet another radical step to reduce corruption, which is undermining the mobilisation potential of the armed forces, the Ukrainian government has acknowledged that the practice is out of control. However, vetting doctors will take a great deal of time, and will place another burden on the services responsible for combatting bribery. Another problem is related to creating an effective mechanism to prevent corruption related to the execution of military contracts. This is evidenced by the delay of more than six months in appointing a director for the Material Security Agency. Despite the corruption scandals uncovered in the Ministry of Defence during this time, many of the countermeasures proved to be purely formal, and did not have any real effect on the problem.


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