

Ukraine makes progress on the Zaporizhzhia front. Day 558 of the war

Jakub Ber, Piotr Żochowski, Jacek Tarociński

The heaviest fighting is still on the Zaporizhzhia front, primarily in the area of the village of Verbove and the hills east of Novoprokopivka. The combatants' exact positions are unknown, but the Ukrainians are managing to widen the wedge in the Russian 58th Army's grouping in the eastern and southern directions (towards Ocheretuvate). The Russians, on the other hand, are maintaining their fortified positions in Novoprokopivka, thus effectively blocking the Ukrainians' advance along the road to Tokmak. From the available drone footage, it can be assumed that Ukrainian assault troops have forced their way through a section of the fortification line located on the western outskirts of Verbove which had been fortified with ditches and anti-tank barriers, the so-called 'dragon's teeth'. The troops from the 58th Army are continuing to defend their positions, and for the time being, there are no signs of a collapse or of any significant decrease in Russian artillery and drone activity. The commander of the Ukrainian Tavriya Army Grouping, Brigadier-General Oleksandr Tarnavsky, stated in an interview with the *Observer* that Ukrainian troops are now located between the first and second lines of Russian defence on a key section of the Zaporizhzhia front. He estimated that 60% of the Russians' resources and time had been spent on preparing the first line, relying on the Ukrainians being unable to get through this obstacle. According to Tarnavsky, sooner or later the Russians will run out of forces to man the line of fortifications and conduct mobile defence.

In recent days there was a reported decline in fighting activity in the Russian 5th and 36th Army's defence zone south of Velyka Novosilka. The Ukrainians have not conducted any major offensive operations along the Mokri Yaly river, where they launched a limited attack on the wings of the Russian grouping. Instead, the intensity of the fighting near Bakhmut has increased, particularly south of the town; both sides launched attacks and made attempts to capture several key positions lying close to the Mayorsk-Bakhmut railway line. Neither the Ukrainians nor the Russians have gained a decisive advantage in these clashes. The very high saturation of the front with Russian troops in the Bakhmut-Klishchiivka-Andriivka-Kurdiumivka section should be noted. In addition to several regiments and mechanised brigades, the largest grouping of Russian airborne troops on the entire front is currently operating in this area (the 11th, 31st and 83rd landing and assault brigades, and part of the 106th Airborne Division).

Intense fighting is continuing on the border of Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts, but the Russian attempts to break through the Ukrainian defences have had little effect. As in previous weeks, the fighting is mainly focused in the area north-east of Kupyansk and the Russian

bridgehead on the west bank of the Zherebets river, in the area of Novoyehorivka. The redeployment of the 76th landing and assault division to the Zaporizhzhia front at the end of August should also be noted; it had been fighting in the forests in the area of Kreminna since the beginning of the year, and had previously formed the core of the Russian grouping operating on the north bank of the River Dnieper.

On the night of 2–3 September, the Russians attacked the south of Ukraine with 25 Shahed 136/131 drones. According to the Ukrainian Air Force Command, 22 of them were shot down. Three hit targets located in the Danube ports (including damaging tanks holding vegetable oil in Reni). There was also a missile attack on Kryvyi Rih on 2 September, but the Ukrainian side did not provide specific information either on its effects or on the missiles used by the Russians. On the night of 3–4 September, the strike on the south of the country was repeated, this time on a larger scale: the Ukrainian air defence claimed to have shot down 23 of the 32 Shahed 136/131 drones used. Once again the main target was the Danube ports (warehouses and agricultural equipment were among the items destroyed), in addition to unknown targets located in Dnipropetrovsk oblast. According to a statement by Ukrainian foreign ministry spokesman Oleh Nikolenko, during the attack on the port of Izmail some drones fell and exploded on Romanian territory, but the Romanian Ministry of Defence denied these reports.

On 31 August, the independent French think-tank Action Resilience Institute (ARI) published a report detailing the number of Russian tanks in storage and repair bases in the period immediately preceding the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. Based on satellite imagery, the authors counted 5666 tanks (1009 of unknown types, 624 T-80s, 2055 T-72s, 1512 T-62s and 466 T-54/55s). Including concealed vehicles, they estimated that Russia had between 6000 and 7000 tanks in reserve at the beginning of 2022. This represents a much lower figure than that reported by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), which estimated 10,200 vehicles. The ARI report also stated that it takes 30–60 days to repair a tank standing in the open, and that the Russians are able to restore eight tanks a month (Moscow claimed the figure was 23). Since 2014, tank production and modernisation in Russia has halved, from around 300 to 140 tanks a year.

On 31 August, the Belgian defence ministry announced that it would supply Ukraine with eight RIM-7 Sea Sparrow anti-aircraft missiles (a version of the AIM-7 Sparrow used in naval air defence systems). These missiles were bought from Germany at a cost of €7000 apiece. Belgium has also announced that it is completing a €150,000 aid package, of which the Sea Sparrows will form a part.

On 4 September, Ukraine's outgoing defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov said that the value of volunteer aid donated to the military represented only 3% of Ukraine's total war spending. He added that one day of warfare burdens the budget with an expenditure of around \$100 million. In the context of Ukraine's accession to NATO, he pointed out that by the end of 2023, a further 200 measures are planned to be implemented which will bring the Ukrainian Armed Forces up to Alliance standards (287 of these have already been implemented). He further declared that standardisation "will not be crucial in the decision to join NATO"; as he put it, the decisive factors will be the guarantee of civilian control over the Armed Forces, the transparency of the procedures governing their functioning, and the joint planning of military operations.

On 3 September the president's representative in parliament, Fedir Venislavskiy, tabled a bill abolishing the deferral of mobilisation for men over 30 who continue studying after obtaining higher education. He estimated that this opportunity had been taken by 60,000 men. If the draft is adopted, this regulation will also apply to those who started their studies in the 2022/23 academic year. Commenting on a statement by the head of the Servant of the People party, David Arakhamia, that Ukrainians who had evaded military service who left Ukraine on the basis of false certificates of unfitness for service could be extradited, Venislavskiy noted that such a mechanism could be introduced, but it would require the prior initiation of criminal proceedings.

On 4 September, Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu confirmed that he had taken the decision to abandon the Zapad 2023 military exercises in Belarus; the immediate reason given was the involvement of Russian forces on the Ukrainian front.

On 5 September, the Russian Volunteer Corps, fighting on the Ukrainian side, reported that a sabotage group had entered the territory of Bryansk oblast the day before. A clash with FSB border guards occurred there, during which two of the latter were killed.

On 4 September, British military intelligence warned that Moscow is still using its digital capabilities to wage cyber warfare. The report recalled that the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) published a report on 31 August concerning a malware program called Infamous Chisel which gives unauthorised access to Android-based mobile devices. The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has revealed that Russians are attempting to infiltrate Ukrainian military networks using hacking groups operating under the names Sandworm, Iron Viking, Seashell Blizzard and Voodoo Bear, which are linked to the Main Centre for Special Technology of Military Intelligence. The UK has warned of the risks of using AI-based chatbots, which can be used to disseminate disinformation.

Commentary

- The Russian offensive operation on the border of Kharkiv, Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (between the state border and the River Donets) has been ongoing for almost two months now, but it has so far failed to break through the Ukrainian defences. As it appears, originally the Russians' main objective was to reach a line along the whole length of the River Oskil (since last year's Ukrainian offensive in Kharkiv oblast, they have only been able to control a 30-kilometre stretch of the eastern bank of the river running from the border to the area of Kupyansk). If the Russians could have shifted the frontline westwards and based it on natural obstacles (the Oskil and Donets rivers), that would have allowed them to go on the defensive and move some of their forces to more important sections of the front (such as the Donbas and southern Ukraine). However this has not happened, and the Russian troops now find themselves tied up in fighting; with a few exceptions, directing them, for example, towards Tokmak would be a risky and logistically difficult task. As for the Ukrainian side, despite significant losses and the involvement of several newly-formed brigades on this secondary section of the front, their defence of the Kupyansk, Borova and Lyman axes should so far be considered a success.
- The developments along the Zaporizhzhia front over the past two to three weeks show a dynamic in favour of the Ukrainians. They are managing to maintain the initiative and –

albeit at a slow pace – they are capturing more and more Russian points of resistance. However, the conditions of the terrain are still the key factor slowing down the Ukrainian advance. The Russians control the hills overlooking the area, and the Ukrainians have limited opportunities to manoeuvre (both their assault groups and their supply deliveries are challenged); this means that any attempted Ukrainian attack is immediately localised and meets with a response from Russian artillery and other firepower. Despite these problems, the Ukrainians are managing to widen the wedge they have driven into the Russian grouping. The key issue in this situation is the state of both sides' retreats. The Russians do not have any large and valuable reserve grouping on the Tokmak axis which could launch a counter-attack should the Ukrainians break the front. Their only chance of stopping the offensive is for them to hold on to their line of fortification. The coming weeks will show whether the Russian command will be able to reinforce the 58th Army's grouping to such an extent as to stop the defences crumbling at the main location along the Kopani-Novoprokopivka-Verbove section.

- The cancellation of the Zapad 2023 exercises is a consequence of Russia's need to continuously replenish its losses of personnel and equipment during the fighting in Ukraine. The complicated situation on the frontline has sidelined the propaganda significance of the manoeuvres, which have been used in the past as an element of psychological warfare to increase tensions in the region. There is still no confirmation that the Belarusian-Russian Union Shield 2023 exercise planned for late September on Russian territory has also been cancelled. So far, the defence ministries of both countries have not reported any preparations for the exercise, which may mean that it too will fail to materialise.

