

Fake elections in the shadow of the offensive. Day 565 of the war

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Over the past few days, Ukrainian forces have stepped up their offensive operations south-east of Velyka Novosilka in Donetsk oblast, and have achieved minor success in the vicinity of Novomayorske. South-west of Bakhmut, they succeeded in driving the invaders out of Andriivka, south of Klishchiivka. The Russian defence in the area is now based on the Bakhmut-Horlivka railway line. On 10 September, Ukraine's deputy defence minister Hanna Maliar reported that Ukrainian troops had seized Opytne south-west of Avdiivka, although reports on the situation there remain unclear; in previous months this section of the frontline had been relatively quiet.

To the south-west of Velyka Novosilka, the invaders pushed back the Ukrainian army from the village of Priyutne; this was indirectly confirmed by the General Staff of the Ukrainian army, which reported that defences in the area of Rivnopil (7 km north of Priyutne) had been maintained. According to some sources, the Russian forces counterattacked successfully in the area of Orikhiv, thanks to which they regained a piece of territory north-west of the village of Verbove. They also retained the areas they had seized in the western part of Marinka in the last few days, although several quarters in the west of the town remain under Ukrainian control. In the other directions, none of the offensive actions taken by either side brought about any significant changes.

On 11 September, Maliar summarised the Ukrainian progress over the past week. In the south (in the area of responsibility of the Tavria operational-strategic group), the defenders regained a further 4.8 km² of ground, including 1.5 km² in the Robotyne-Verbove area (the local command estimated that they had encroached into the aggressor's positions to a depth of 1 km), bringing the area liberated since 4 June to 256.5 km². In the vicinity of Bakhmut, Ukrainian gains were estimated at 2 km², making a total of 49 km since the offensive began. Maliar stressed that "the first line of defence has been broken in some places" and "our troops are moving on". On the same day, a spokesman for the Tavria group Oleksandr Shtupun estimated that "in the current stage of the counter-offensive" Ukrainian forces are advancing by 50–200 metres per day.

Ukrainian reports that they had broken through the enemy's first line of defence on 8 September were referred to by Estonian military intelligence, which stated that the Ukrainian Armed Forces probably had succeeded in breaking the front edge of the defence in Zaporizhzhia oblast, but had not yet reached the main fortifications of its first line. According to the Estonians, the Russians have redeployed reinforcements from other areas to the section under threat and reorganised its defence, so it seems unlikely that the

Ukrainians will achieve operational success any time soon. On 10 September General Mark Milley, the chairman of the US College of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stressed that the Ukrainians were fighting and advancing consistently, but that they probably had only 30-45 days of weather suitable for such operations left, and that with the onset of autumn their ability to manoeuvre would be limited.

On 10 September, Kyiv and Kyiv oblast were the main targets of Russian kamikaze drone attacks; an infrastructure facility was said to have been damaged in one area, while most of the damage in and around the city was said to have been caused by shrapnel. The Ukrainian Air Force Command reported shooting down 26 of the 33 Shahed-136/131 drones used by the invaders. Russian missiles (a total of five, according to the Ukrainian General Staff) struck the city of Kramatorsk and the towns of Shyrokye and Trudovo in Zaporizhzhia oblast on the same day. On 11 September, Kryvyi Rih was targeted by a combined attack of drones and missiles. The Air Force Command stated that all 12 Shahed-136/131 drones had been destroyed, and reported that the invaders had used Kh-59 and Kh-31P anti-radiation missiles. Later, command spokesman Yuri Ihnat added that most of them failed to reach their targets; according to the General Staff, the enemy launched a total of 10 missiles that day. In addition, two Shahed-136/131 drones hit targets in the Chernihiv oblast. The Russian side reported further unsuccessful Ukrainian drone attacks (in Crimea and in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts).

On 10 September Vadym Skibitsky, deputy head of Ukrainian Military Intelligence (HUR), announced that the enemy forces located in the temporarily occupied territories including Crimea numbered more than 420,000 men (this calculation did not include the National Guard or the special services). He stated that 310,000 troops have been mobilised into the Russian army over the past three months, and claimed that the Russian defence industrial complex is trying to step up efforts to maintain smooth supplies of armaments and ammunition. The invaders are using the missiles they receive as soon as they get them, as evidenced by the use of missiles manufactured this April in the attack on Kryvyi Rih during May. Skibitsky stressed that stopping Russian attacks will require “neutralising” the production of components used for military purposes. To this end, he called for a consistent sanctions policy, stopping countries that have not joined the restrictions from supplying the necessary components, and the destruction of Russian arms facilities. According to HUR, 46 Iskander system launchers are currently being set up along the border with Ukraine.

On 11 September, the Ukrainian General Staff stated that “in view of the catastrophic losses”, a mass forced mobilisation of between 400,000 and 700,000 people will begin in Russia and the occupied territories of Ukraine in the near future. In Moscow and St Petersburg, the number of those called up is expected to be small: the majority of the new recruits are to come from Russia’s regions. There are also plans to mobilise 40,000 Chechens to supplement barrage units in the rear of the invading troops. The staff stressed that the only chance of survival for the recruited Russian soldiers was to surrender to the defenders. On the same day, the deputy head of HUR stated that Moscow would not risk announcing another mass mobilisation due to the upcoming elections there. He announced that 90,000–100,000 Russians had been mobilised this year to replenish troop losses, and there was no need for a larger-scale action. However, he stressed that mechanisms were to be set up in Russia which would enable mass mobilisation, which could then be carried out at a later stage. In addition, Moscow is to continue recruiting for contract service; Skibitsky

estimated that the plan was to recruit around 400,000 men in 2023. Both mobilised soldiers and conscripts (expected to number 240,000 this year) are to be encouraged to join, mainly by offering them favourable financial conditions.

On 8–10 September, the Russians held ‘elections’ to regional authorities in the occupied territories. They reported that the turnout in the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic was 72.53%, 66.83% in the Zaporizhzhia oblast, 74% in the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic, and 62.23% in the Kherson oblast. These figures are unreliable, and the voting itself was a *de facto* special operation carried out under the supervision of the Russian services.

During the ‘elections’ in the occupied territories, Ukrainian forces carried out several attacks to disrupt the elections. On 9 September, a sabotage group destroyed a car carrying ballots in Nova Kakhovka. TV broadcasts in Crimea were also disrupted by a video calling for a boycott of the elections. On the same day, Ukrainian drones destroyed a polling station in the village of Kamianka-Dniprovska in Zaporizhzhia oblast; the same thing happened the day before in Berdyansk. Another attack by drones on a polling station occurred in the village of Skelky in the Vasylivka raion of Zaporizhzhia oblast. Ukrainian special services have identified more than 3500 collaborators and Russian supervisors who were involved in organising the illegal vote.

On 11 September, the Ukrainian government’s Centre for National Resistance said that rumours appearing in the media that the Lukashenka regime was recruiting mercenaries from the Wagner Group residing in Belarus were credible. These men are being recruited on the basis of contracts signed with the security company GardServis, which was set up in 2019 under the aegis of Viktor Sheiman, Lukashenko’s advisor on Africa. They are being trained at the Dinamo football club’s camp in Marina Horka near Minsk, where an internal army unit of the Interior Ministry is stationed. On the same day, independent Russian media reported that former Wagner fighters interested in enlisting in the National Guard had been being vetted since mid-August.

On 8 September, the US European Command reported that “at the request of Ukraine”, the training of 200 Ukrainian servicemen who are part of the Abrams crews and maintenance personnel would be extended by several weeks until all 31 tanks were ready. On the same day, the Danish defence ministry announced the arrival in Ukraine of the first 10 Leopard 1 tanks, which are being sent jointly by Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany; earlier, Berlin had reported the delivery of these tanks as part of another German military support package. Danish instructors will train more Leopard crews in Germany. On 11 September, Rheinmetall confirmed Germany’s announcement during July’s NATO summit that it would hand over a further 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles to the Ukrainian army this year (the corporation sent 20 of each type in March and June). Preparation of the new batch of Marders was due to start in August, with Rheinmetall estimating the value of the order at “tens of millions of euros”. On the same day, a batch of equipment purchased by the World Congress of Ukrainians was handed over to the defenders, including British FV432 Trojan armoured personnel carriers. In total, the organisation has already supplied the Ukrainian army with 40 vehicles of various types.

On 8 September, BAE Systems’ head Charles Woodburn announced that in a few months the company could organise the production of spare parts for 105-mm L119 towed howitzers in Ukraine. On 10 September, deputy minister Maliar stated that Kyiv and Stockholm had

agreed to jointly produce at least 1000 CV90 infantry fighting vehicles. Malar called them the best IFVs in the world, especially compared to the post-Soviet BMP-1s and BMP-2s. She did not provide any further details of the agreement, although it has previously been reported that Ukraine would enter into co-operation with the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which had signed contracts to purchase the CV90s.

Material has appeared in Western media suggesting that Washington has already made a *de facto* decision to give Kyiv very short-range (up to 300 km) ATACMS ballistic missile systems. On 11 September, President Volodymyr Zelenski stated in an interview with CNN that he expected to receive them as early as this autumn. In response to his statement, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller announced that the US position on delivering ATACMS to Ukraine has not changed: formally, the US is still considering the issue.

Commentary

- The reports from Ukraine's General Staff and intelligence service concerning another possible wave of mobilisation in Russia indicate that both institutions are primarily aiming to spread disinformation. With such a far-reaching divergence of messages, it cannot be ruled out that the services are competing with each other in the information sphere; however, it is more likely that this is a deliberate act (especially as HUR has also reported on more than one occasion that the Russians are planning another mass mobilisation). Of the two narratives, HUR's message should be considered as more in line with reality, especially if one takes into account the mass dismissals from service observed after the first phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was defeated. Participation in the so-called special military operation is now seen in Russia primarily as an opportunity to make money. For this reason it is still extremely attractive, especially for residents of poorer regions: a contract private receives the equivalent of US\$2000 at the start of his service, not including the occasional one-off payment. Recruitment is maintained at a steady level by keeping participation in the war at a relatively voluntary level; the mobilised reservists and conscripts are not sent to Ukraine unless they sign a contract.
- Denmark's announcement that it has donated the first batch of Leopard 1 tanks to Kyiv confirms that the countries supporting Ukraine militarily do not have a coherent communication policy, even when they co-operate with each other. Previous German reports had even suggested that Berlin was the donor – even though Germany is only responsible for overhauling the tanks, which themselves have mainly been donated by Denmark. The result of this communication policy is a number of misrepresentations, especially in the *Ukraine Support Tracker* reports published periodically by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW). In recent days, this publication estimated German military support to Ukraine at €17.1 billion, the second highest after the US. Leaving aside the way in which the value of donated armaments and military equipment is calculated (some donors have reported the purchase price of new items for their own armed forces, which is often many times higher than the price of the old and worn-out equipment donated to Kyiv), the IfW counts all the announcements made as military support to Ukraine (including deliveries of German armaments whose production has not yet started, as in the case of the RCH 155 howitzers on Boxer armoured personnel carrier chassis) as well as reports of deliveries of non-military equipment and materials, which

are often sent to the Ukrainian police and health services, among other recipients. Taking market prices into account, the total value of the arms and equipment of a strictly military nature which Germany has transferred to the Ukrainian army to date can be estimated at €3 billion at most.

