

Both sides concentrating forces. Day 582 of the war

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski

The situation in the combat areas remains relatively stable, and the attempts both sides have made to break through their opponents' defences in recent days have been unsuccessful. The area around Avdiivka and Marinka in Donetsk oblast and the Robotyne-Verbove area south of Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia oblast are still seeing the heaviest fighting. Earlier reports that the Russians seized Orikhovo-Vasylivka north-west of Bakhmut have not been confirmed, although Russian forces have entered the village and fortified their positions in its eastern part. According to a spokesman for the Armed Forces of Ukraine's Eastern Group, the Russians are preparing to resume their offensive in the Kupyansk-Luhansk direction (on the borders between the Kharkiv & Luhansk oblasts and the Donetsk & Luhansk oblasts). The invaders are said to be forming 12 assault companies numbering a total of 2000 troops to break through the Ukrainian defences. There has also been an increase in the intensity of Russian airstrikes, which have destroyed the Ukrainian crossings over the Oskil river. The Ukrainians are still concentrating their forces in the northern part of Donetsk oblast (mainly on the flanks of Bakhmut and in the Lyman-Kreminna-Siversk triangle) and in the right-bank part of Kherson oblast.

On 28 September, the Russians launched a massive kamikaze drone attack on the Ukrainian army's logistical facilities in Cherkasy, Dnipropetrovsk and Kirovohrad oblasts. Defenders reported that an infrastructure facility in Nikopol was damaged, and it is likely that an ammunition depot near Bohdanivka in Kirovohrad oblast was also destroyed. According to a communiqué from the Ukrainian General Staff, the aggressor used 39 Shahed-136/131 drones, 31 of which were shot down, while according to the Air Force Command, 34 of the 44 attacking Shaheds were downed. In addition, Russian missiles were said to have hit Kupyansk in the Kharkiv oblast (using a Grom E-1 hybrid missile) as well as Komyshevakh in Zaporizhzhia oblast (with an S-300 missile).

On 27 and 29 September there were further missile attacks on an 'infrastructure facility' near Mykolaiv (most likely on the Kulbakyne airfield once again). On 27 September, a Russian Grom E-1 also struck an infrastructure facility in the village of Kruhlakivka near Kupyansk. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the invaders allegedly used a total of five Shahed-136/131 drones and two missiles that day. However, the Mykolaiv region's military administration reported that only 20 drones of this type were shot down over its area. A power line was said to have been damaged as a result of falling debris. On 29 September, a Russian missile (S-300) also hit Kostiantynivka, damaging warehouses and other areas.

Ukrainian forces continued their attacks in the border regions of the Russian Federation, using at least ten drones per day, according to Russian data. On 29 September, a substation in the Kursk oblast was damaged, cutting power to five villages.

On 28 September, the German media reported that the Federal Antimonopoly Office had given its approval for the creation of a joint venture between Rheinmetall and the Ukrainian Defence Industry (formerly Ukroboronprom). According to the German company, it is to operate in Ukraine (with its HQ in Kyiv); in the first phase of its existence, it will deal with the maintenance and overhaul of vehicles donated by Germany and Kyiv's other partners. In the future, cooperation may also extend to the joint development and production of 'military systems' which Ukraine would export. Rheinmetall's management expects the relevant approvals to be issued by the other federal authorities in the near future. On the same day, French defence minister Sébastien Lecornu signed a memorandum of intent to cooperate between Ukraine's Defence Procurement Agency and France's General Directorate of Armaments (DGA) during his visit to Kyiv. Also on 28 September, Michael John McCord, who is responsible for financial matters at the Pentagon, announced that the US Department of Defense had \$5 billion left to supply arms to Ukraine by the end of this year. However, only \$1.6 billion of this sum can be used to fund replenishment contracts that allow for the transfer of finished equipment and ammunition from the US Army's stockpile. Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh confirmed that Ukrainian pilots had started English-language training in the US.

On 27 September, the Bulgarian parliament voted to give Ukraine faulty 5W55R(K) missiles for the S-300 air defence systems which are beyond the capacity of the Bulgarian arms industry to restore. By doing so, Sofia has acknowledged that the Ukrainians do have the capability to repair and/or revitalise them. In addition, Bulgaria is to donate small-arms ammunition to the Ukrainian Interior Ministry. On the same day, the Lithuanian defence ministry announced that it would provide Ukraine with radiolocation equipment for maritime surveillance.

According to the assumptions of the draft Russian budget for 2024 made public on 22–25 September, 29.3 per cent of total expenditure is budgeted for military purposes. In the National Defence section, 10.8 trillion roubles (\$112 billion) is to be spent, representing 6% of the country's GDP. This represents an increase of 70% compared to this year's outlays. As of August this year Russia is expected to spend 6.4 trillion roubles (3.9% of GDP) on defence in 2023; the original plan was to spend 5 trillion roubles, or 19% of total expenditure). The Bloomberg agency recalled that 4.7 trillion roubles was spent from the National Defence section in 2022, and 3.5 trillion roubles in 2021. The last time a similar ratio of military outlays to total spending was recorded was during the declining period of the Soviet Union (29.4% in 1990).

On 29 September, the Russian defence ministry announced the start of the autumn conscription phase as of 1 October, which will also cover the four Ukrainian oblasts annexed by Russia. However the conscripts will not serve on their home territories or otherwise take part in the so-called special military operation. The autumn conscription period, which normally begins in October, lasts until 31 December; in 2022 it started in November due to the so-called 'partial mobilisation' which had been conducted earlier.

On 27 September, the Ukrainian government appointed three new deputy defence ministers: Yuriy Dzhyhyr (responsible for financial affairs; he has served as a deputy finance minister, and worked as a consultant to the World Bank for three years on the financial aspects of health care reforms); Natalia Kalmykova (responsible for social and societal issues; she is a head of the Ukrainian Veterans Fund, and was previously a deputy director of the Come Back Alive Foundation); and Kateryna Chernohorenko (responsible for digitalisation; at the Ministry of Digital Transformation she headed the Drone Army programme, which acquires drones from donors).

On 27 September, Ukraine's deputy defence minister Oleksandr Pavlyuk announced that 10 engineer-sapper battalions were being formed (70% of their personnel have already been recruited), whose tasks would include clearing mines and removing unexploded ordnance and bombs. He added that new demining technologies, including the use of drones, are being explored. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said that almost 40 partner countries and organisations have agreed to contribute around \$250 million to purchase demining equipment. He said that sapper operations would have to cover an area of 174,000 km² and could take decades to complete. He added that Ukraine currently has about 3000 sappers, whereas a minimum of 10,000 are needed. According to World Bank estimates, the total cost of such an operation in Ukraine could reach \$37bn.

Referring to the outcome of his meeting with his US counterpart Merrick Garland, Ukraine's Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin confirmed on 27 September that the US Department of Justice and the FBI are providing support to Ukrainian investigators in researching Russian war crimes. He indicated that the Ukrainian side wants cyberattacks, the destruction of cultural heritage sites and illegal trafficking to be recognised as war crimes.

On 27 September Illia Yevlash, a spokesperson for the Eastern Grouping of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, said that some of the Wagner Group mercenaries who had been in Belarus had been sent to the Ukrainian front after signing a contract with the Russian defence ministry. However, they no longer constitute an independent formation, as some of them have been engaged to train soldiers and some are fighting as part of different units. On 29 September, Vladimir Putin instructed the former chief of staff of the Wagner Group, retired Colonel Andrei Troshev, to start forming volunteer units which could be used in operations against Ukraine. The formation of these units is to be overseen by the deputy defence minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov. Troshev, who did not support Yevgeny Prigozhin's rebellion, was previously in charge of logistics and prisoner recruitment.

Reports indicating a rise in anti-Russian sentiment in the occupied areas are emerging. On 28 September, the Ukrainian government's National Resistance Centre reported that the collaborationist administration of the occupied part of Kherson oblast had sent a complaint to the Russian authorities about the conduct of Russian soldiers. Under the guise of searching for saboteurs, they have been searching houses & flats and then looting them, and are also confiscating private cars. The day before, a video was posted on YouTube in which Mariupol residents appeal to Putin to provide them with decent living conditions. They point out that commercial properties are now being built on the site of their homes, which were destroyed by Russian troops.

Commentary

- The troop concentrations by both warring sides indicates that they intend to carry out further offensive actions before the weather conditions deteriorate. Their actions during recent months confirm that the Ukrainians and Russians have relatively well-organised defences, and that attempts to break through them have resulted in heavy losses. For this reason, it is highly likely that both sides' plans for the coming weeks are limited to trying to achieve local successes, such as the seizure of main junctions in the areas they target: in the case of the Ukrainians, this means Bakhmut and/or Tokmak, and in the case of the Russians, Kupyansk. For the defenders, the occupied city of Enerhodar, on whose territory the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant is located, is also of great prestige. It cannot be ruled out that if one of the attacking sides achieves a success, they will want to use it to develop a larger-scale offensive (especially in light of the Ukrainian announcements that their operations will continue regardless of weather conditions). However, neither the Russians nor the Ukrainians are likely to have the forces and resources in the theatre of operations to do so at present.
- The Kremlin is continuing its efforts to sort out the status of the former Wagner mercenaries. The decision to entrust Troshev with organising the 'volunteer troops' is intended to encourage mercenaries to sign contracts with the defence ministry and carry out the orders of regular army commanders. It should be stressed that Troshev is not taking over all of Prigozhin's businesses, such as those which used to procure food supplies for the army (like the Konkord company) or the infamous 'troll factories' in St Petersburg. His task is to use the mercenaries to continue fighting on the Ukrainian front. There are currently no signs that he will be directing the mercenary operations in Africa; control over these is most likely to be exercised by Russian military intelligence.

