

Massacre of Ukrainian artillerymen. Day 621 of the war

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski

On 3 November, which in Ukraine is celebrated as Rocket Forces and Artillery Day, a Russian Iskander-M missile struck a group of artillerymen of the 'Zakarpattia' 128th Mountain Assault Brigade who were getting ready to receive their honorary decorations. The attack occurred in the village of Zarichne in Zaporizhzhia oblast. The unit's command reported the deaths of 19 soldiers; a representative of the Ukrainian parliament reported that 28 soldiers were killed and 53 wounded; and unofficial reports put the number of dead at 50. Two days later, a three-day mourning period in the Transcarpathian region, where the 128th MAB is permanently located, was declared. The head of the Main Directorate of Rocket Forces and Artillery & Unmanned Systems of the General Staff, General Serhiy Baranov, announced that massive kamikaze drone attacks would be carried out against occupied Crimea and Russia's border regions in the coming months. On 6 November, President Volodymyr Zelenski suspended a brigade commander who was allegedly late for the ceremony to decorate the soldiers, and only turned up there after the missile strike. An investigation has been launched to identify those responsible for the security breach.

On 4 November, Russian Iskander-K cruise missiles struck the River Dnieper, destroying an infrastructure facility, as well as the area of Myrhorod in Poltava oblast (according to some sources, the targets in both cases were airfields). The Ukrainian Air Force Command claimed to have shot down three of the four missiles used by the invaders. Russian forces also attacked Sumy oblast with Shahed-136/131 drones, as well as Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts with missiles from S-300 systems. On the night of 5–6 November, Russian Iskander-M and Oniks missiles & kamikaze drones struck Odesa city. The port infrastructure and an industrial facility were damaged, and shrapnel also caused damage in the city centre (32 buildings, including a museum, were reported damaged, and eight residents were injured). The Ukrainian General Staff announced the destruction of 15 of the 22 attacking Shahed-136/131 drones, and also stated that the enemy had used a total of seven missiles on 4 November and six the next day. The right-bank part of Kherson oblast is still being targeted by intense Russian artillery and air attacks. On 5 November, the Russians used 87 guided aerial bombs in that area, the highest number in a day since February 2022.

On 4 November, Ukrainian forces launched a missile attack on the eastern part of Crimea; the bridge over the Kerch Strait was probably the main target. The infrastructure of the Zaliv shipyard in Kerch was damaged, as was the Kalibr cruise missile-carrying corvette *Askold* which is under construction there. This ship was due to have entered service this December, and was at the equipment quay at the time of the attack. The Ukrainians used 15 Storm Shadow/SCALP cruise missiles in the strike, of which the Russian side claimed to have shot down 13. A day later, an ammunition depot for Russian forces exploded in the town of

Siedove, in the occupied part of Donetsk oblast; the cause of the blast is unknown. On 7 November, the Russians reported another attack on Crimea, in which Ukrainian forces used a total of 17 kamikaze drones. The debris of at least one of them was said to have caused damage in the outskirts of Sevastopol.

The invading forces approached the borders of Avdiivka town from the south-west, advancing along the main T-05-05 route through the city, and attacked the main Ukrainian bastion on its west side, in the area of the so-called 9th quarter (the 'Khemik' micro-district). Meanwhile north of Avdiivka (near Krasnohorivka), a Ukrainian counterattack pushed the Russians out of some positions along the railway line. The situation in the rest of the combat zones has not fundamentally changed. The defenders are still holding out in parts of the village of Krynky on the left bank of the Dnieper, and also attacked again near Verbove south of Orikhiv, but had no success. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the heaviest clashes outside the area of Avdiivka took place in and around Marinka. The number of hostile attacks there is still around 20 per day. With less intensity, the invaders stormed the north and south-east of Kupyansk (on 6 November the number of attacks there rose to 20 per day, more than twice what it had been in the previous days), as well as to the south of Velyka Novosilka (mainly in the area around the village of Staromayorske) and north and south-west of Bakhmut, where the front has now stabilised along the Bakhmut-Horlivka railway line.

On 3 November, the Pentagon released details of a \$425 million military support package for Kyiv. \$300m from the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) has been earmarked for the purchase of laser-guided munitions to combat drones. These are most likely to be 70-mm Hydra missiles in a modified version of the AGR-20 APKWS for the 14 VAMPIRE systems ordered for the Ukrainian army. Four were delivered in the middle of this year, and the others are expected to reach the country by the end of the year. The price tag suggests that the order is for several thousand missiles. As the US government has acknowledged, the funds are now exhausted, so this is the last support package which will be funded by the USAI; further packages under the initiative can only be sent after Congress adopts the next tranche of financial support for Kyiv. Equipment worth \$125 million from the US Army's Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) is to be sent to Ukraine from US Army depots: this will include NASAMS (most likely AIM-120 AMRAAMs) and HIMARS (GMLRS) launcher rounds, 105-mm and 155-mm artillery ammunition, Javelin & TOW anti-tank guided missiles and AT4 anti-tank grenade launchers, more than 3 million rounds of small arms ammunition and hand grenades, M18A1 Claymore directional anti-personnel mines and 12 tractors for transporting heavy weaponry.

On 4 November Sweden's defence ministry confirmed the shipment of eight 155-mm Archer howitzers to Ukraine. A day later, the media showed pictures of M1150 engineering vehicles on Abrams tank chassis, which Washington had not listed in its delivery packages. The Ukrainians have received between one and six of these machines, which will most likely be used for demining. On 6 November the French company Verney-Carron of the Cybergun consortium announced that it had signed an agreement with the UkrSpetsEksport company to supply Ukraine with 10,000 assault rifles, 2000 sniper rifles and 400 grenade launchers worth a total of €36 million. The deliveries are to start within six months of signing the framework contract, and will last for ten months.

On 3 November President Zelensky, at the request of defence minister Rustem Umierov, dismissed the commander of the Special Operations Forces Major General Viktor Horenko, who had been in post since July 2022; his post has been taken over by Colonel Serhiy Lupanchuk. The personnel reshuffle had not been signalled beforehand, and Horenko himself stated that he did not know the reasons for the dismissal, which he learned about from the media; he added that the decision had not been consulted with Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Alluding to his combat experience, he criticised the leadership of the defence ministry. He pointed out that while there are many good managers, “soldiers cannot be commanded from offices”. On the same day, President Zelensky stated that Horenko would now perform “special tasks” in military intelligence, and said that his successor was an officer with extensive combat experience. Umierov refused to give the reasons for the dismissal: he announced that commenting on the reasons and rationale for changes in important military positions during wartime “could help the enemy to weaken Ukraine”.

On 4 November President Zelensky, referring to General Zaluzhnyi’s statements about the failure of the counter-offensive in his interview with the *Economist*, said that it was not at an impasse, and explained its slowdown in terms of Russia’s domination of the air. Zaluzhnyi’s words were also criticised by the deputy head of the President’s Office, Ihor Zhovkva, who pointed out that the military should not disclose information about the situation at the front, as this would play into the hands of enemy propaganda. A day later, in an interview with the US television channel NBC, Zelensky admitted that Ukraine’s progress in the war had been slow and that fatigue with the long-running conflict was evident. Nevertheless he insisted that Ukrainian soldiers “are still more motivated than any Russian”. He added that, despite widespread rumours, no scenario of starting peace talks with the invaders is being considered.

On 5 November, Minister Umierov approved the ‘Concept of military personnel policy to 2028’. This document points to the need to meet the armed forces’ manpower needs during wartime, to continue integration into the Euro-Atlantic security space, and to ensure the compatibility of the Ukrainian army with the armed forces of NATO countries. The defence ministry hopes that within five years the Ukrainian Armed Forces will consist exclusively of contract soldiers. The existing compulsory military service will be replaced by intensive military training for citizens of conscription age.

On 4 November, Kyiv’s municipal authorities announced that they had allocated 84.6 million hryvnias (over \$2.3 million) to support military intelligence since the end of August. This money will be spent on the purchase of weapons and special equipment for soldiers operating in reconnaissance and sabotage groups.

The State Border Service reported on 5 November that Russian forces were continuing to fire artillery shells into the border regions of Chernihiv, Sumy and Kharkiv oblasts. Hostile reconnaissance and sabotage groups are reported to be active in Sumy oblast in particular, making it difficult for Ukrainians to build defensive positions near the border.

On 6 November, the Security Service of Ukraine reported that the activities of 76 bot farms (3 million fake accounts) that operated on Ukrainian territory and propagated Russian disinformation had been blocked since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Since the beginning of this year, some 4000 cyber-attacks on state institutions, critical infrastructure

facilities and telecommunications companies have been neutralised.

Commentary

- The attitude of Ukraine's central and local authorities and command towards the Russian rocket attack on the 128th Mountain Assault Brigade should be understood not only in terms of the defenders' growing problems in maintaining the high morale of the fighting soldiers, or the discrepancies between the presidential administration and the army command in the assessment of the situation, which the media have recently been highlighting. The elimination of an artillery subunit of one of the elite brigade (half of the soldiers of the artillery squadron of the 128th MAB were probably killed or wounded in the attack) is a serious military problem. The training of artillerymen is no less complicated and lengthy than Ukraine's acquisition of new armaments, and these forces have played a prominent role in the trench warfare that has been going on for more than a year. On both sides, it is artillery – which makes extensive use of drones and interacts with aviation – that has borne the main burden of deterring enemy attacks and destroying their immediate hinterland. Because of this, Ukrainian and Russian howitzers and rocket launchers, and their accompanying ammunition depots, remain each side's main targets. The success of the offensive actions taken by the warring parties depends on the outcome of their direct clashes.
- General Zaluzhnyi's controversial statement about the halt to the counter-offensive revealed the inconsistency of the strategic communication between the military and civilian authorities. The strong reaction from the president and a representative of his office, criticising the commander-in-chief for carelessness, signals that they see Zaluzhnyi's media statement as an exaggeration, and as violating the presidential office's information monopoly. The statement also serves as a warning sign to other senior military officers that they should minimise their presence in the media, as to do otherwise could have political consequences. In this context, the replacement of the commander of the Special Operations Forces – on which, by all indications, Zaluzhnyi was not consulted – is a manifestation of the exercise of civilian control over the army, and also serves to emphasise the exclusive powers of the president and the defence minister when it comes to filling senior positions within it.

