

Ukrainian sabotage in the Belgorod and Kursk oblasts. Day 754 of the war

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The situation on the frontline

Counterattacks by Ukrainian forces pushed the Russians out of some positions north-west of Avdiivka and in Krasnohorivka, but the situation on the front is still characterised by the slow progress of the invading troops. On 12 March, the Russians reported capturing the village of Nevelske, which offers a convenient platform for flanking operations in the southern (Krasnohorivka) and northern (Pervomaiske) directions, but in the following days they halted their offensive operations in this direction. West of Avdiivka they brought about a relative realignment of the front along the Berdychi-Orlivka-Tonenke line. In Zaporizhzhia oblast, Russian forces drove the defenders out from further positions in the Verbove area south-east of Orikhiv, and also increased their activity in the area of Huliaipole, where relative calm had prevailed since last summer.

The Ukrainian command has highlighted the increasing disparity in firepower between the defenders and the invaders. On 18 March, the deputy defence minister General Ivan Hawryluk reported that since the beginning of this year, the Russian advantage in artillery has been 7:1. In the first 77 days of 2024, the Russians dropped more than 3500 aerial bombs on Ukrainian positions – 16 times more than in 2023. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian forces are said to be dealing with an increasing shortage of artillery shells and rockets. Hawryluk's message has been corroborated by a report from the Ukrainian General Staff, according to which another record was set for the daily number of air attacks on the defenders' positions: the Russians carried out 130 such attacks on 15 March.

The situation in the occupied territories

The 'elections' for the President of the Russian Federation took the form of a plebiscite in the occupied territories, in violation of Russian law (for more details, see ['Putin's spectacle: the Soviet-style presidential 'election'](#)). They ran for three days starting on 13 March, with turnout allegedly exceeding 80%. These figures are unreliable because the 'vote' itself was effectively a kind of special operation carried out under the supervision of the secret services and the military, and ballots filled out by unauthorised persons were placed in the ballot boxes.

Under the supervision of Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR), combat operations carried out by units made up of Russian citizens fighting on the Ukrainian side have been continuing in the border region of the Belgorod and Kursk oblasts since 11 March. Soldiers of the Russian Volunteer Corps, the 'Free Russia' Legion, the Siberian Battalion and various Chechen subdivisions took control of several localities; they encountered no effective resistance from their opponents, and took a small group of prisoners. Their operations were supported by Ukrainian forces, including rocket artillery systems fired at the eponymous capital of Belgorod oblast. On 19 March the governor of this region, Vyacheslav Gladkov, admitted that the Ukrainian shelling had forced the local authorities to displace many inhabitants of the villages in the border regions, and announced the evacuation of local children deeper into Russia. **The limited military action by Russian volunteers is aimed at destabilising the situation on Russian territory, and was an attempt to disrupt the presidential 'elections'.** In military terms, the operation has helped to tie up additional Russian forces, which have once again proven unable to provide effective protection of the border area.

In a bid to disrupt voting in Russia, Ukrainian special services carried out various operations in cyberspace. On 15 March, HUR reported that Ukrainian hackers had disrupted the state administration services' website for electronic voting. Residents of localities including Moscow, Tyumen and Novosibirsk had difficulty accessing the system.

Ukrainian kamikaze drones continued to strike targets on Russian territory, mainly infrastructure connected with the oil industry. During the night and morning of 13 March, attacks were launched on refineries in Ryazan, Kstovo in Nizhny Novgorod oblast, and in the area of the town of Kirishi in Leningrad oblast, among others. A fire broke out at the first of these, while no damage was reported at the others. This was most likely the largest such Ukrainian attack to date: the Russian side reported having destroyed 58 attacking drones. On the evening of 13 March, drones hit a refinery in Novoshakhtinsk in Rostov oblast, where production was halted as a result of the damage caused. On 16 March, the refineries in Syzran and Novokuybyshevsk in Samara oblast were the targets of attacks, and both of them were set on fire. A day later, Ukrainian drones hit a refinery at Slavyansk in the Kuban (Krasnodar *krai*), which also caused a fire (one worker was reported killed). On 17 March, facilities in the Belgorod, Yaroslavl, Kaluga and Rostov oblasts were also said to have been attacked, but there were no reports of hits. The Russians announced the destruction of 35 Ukrainian drones on that day.

According to Western estimates, attacks on refineries since January have led to a temporary reduction in the Russian oil industry's daily refining capacity of 10–15% (600,000 barrels according to Gunvor; 900,000 according to JP Morgan). During the period in question, 12 refineries were targeted. Some of them suffered damage to their installations, and their repairs are estimated to take several weeks or even months. Despite repeated strikes, the Russian authorities have failed to provide air defence for facilities owned by Russian oligarchs. It is likely that the government wants to force the owners to cover the costs, which would represent an additional kind of 'taxation' on them to contribute to the production of arms.

The hinterland of the fighting Ukrainian troops in the frontline zone remains the main target of Russian kamikaze missile and drone attacks. On two occasions (13 and 19 March), hostile missiles struck Selydove, which is an important logistical hub for Ukrainian units operating north-west of Donetsk (in the regions of Avdiivka and Marinka). Other locations in the Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts, including Kharkiv and Slavyansk, were also attacked.

The Ukrainian side has highlighted a new use by of the Russians of their Iskander-M missiles – striking the same location with two missiles in quick succession, the so-called ‘double tap’ technique. On 15 March, two Iskanders hit a facility in Odesa which was being used by the Ukrainian Interior Ministry; according to some sources, sub-units of the ‘Liut’ Police Assault Brigade were located there. The Ukrainian side reported 21 dead and 73 wounded civilians & officers. Among those who died was the commander of the ‘Tsunami’ Police Assault Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Oleksandr Hostishchev. On 17 March a similar attack was carried out in Mykolaiv, where the target was an armoured weapons repair facility.

The Russians intensified their strikes on the regions bordering the Russian Federation. On 14 March, a series of attacks on broadcasting infrastructure resulted in the temporary loss of radio and television signals in the Sumy and Kharkiv oblasts. Kamikaze rockets and drones hit Konotop (three times) and Sumy city, among others. On 18 March, Shaheds were used to attack targets deep inside Ukrainian territory. Hits were reported from the Poltava (in the area of Kremenchuk city), Kirovohrad and Khmelnytskyi oblasts. The Kyiv oblast authorities reported that the attack on their area was repulsed without losses. A total of 60 missiles (mainly from S-300 systems) and 105 Shaheds hit targets in Ukraine between the evening of 12 March and the morning of 19 March. The defenders reported that one missile and 82 drones had been shot down.

On 17 March, Ukrainian forces prevented three Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups from penetrating deep into Sumy oblast. The Ukrainian side stressed that the Russians had been repelled by the State Border Service, National Guard and Armed Forces units supported by artillery fire. The border regions of Sumy oblast regularly come under fire from Russian forces, and repeated attempts at attacks by small Russian *spetsnaz* units are a response to the activity of Ukrainian forces on the territory of the Russian Federation.

On 18 March, Ukraine's prime minister Denys Shmyhal announced that the government had allocated an additional 5 billion hryvnias (about \$128 million) for the purchase of drones. The head of the Ukrainian ministry of the economy Yulia Svyrydenko noted that to

date agreements worth around 30 billion hryvnias (more than \$760 million) have already been concluded with drone manufacturers, with contracts worth 14 billion hryvnias (more than \$350 million) in the pipeline. The Ukrainian side claims that local companies are ready to produce more than one million drones – albeit by an unspecified date.

Western support for Ukraine

On 12 March, the US announced a \$300 million military support package to Ukraine, the first since December. The 55th such package since August 2021 includes Stinger launcher missiles, GMLRS missiles for HIMARS launchers, 155-mm and 105-mm artillery ammunition, AT-4 anti-tank grenade launchers and small arms ammunition. These will be transferred from US Army resources under the Presidential Drawdown Authority. Earlier, the media reported that ATACMS ballistic missiles would also be part of the package, but in the end this was not confirmed. Two days later, Pentagon spokesperson Sabrina Singh said that the donated aid package was an “exceptional case”, and there would be no possibility of repeating a similar move unless the US Congress approves new resources to assist Kyiv.

Also on 12 March, new support packages were announced by Denmark, which is to allocate \$335 million, and by France. The sixteenth Danish package includes CAESAR (new, French-made) howitzers, 120-mm self-propelled mortars and ammunition for both these guns. The 155-mm projectiles for the howitzers are to be supplied in cooperation with the Czech Republic and Estonia. As part of the new French package (the value of which was not disclosed), six CAESAR cannon howitzers and 150 drones will be handed over ‘in the coming months’. French prime minister Gabriel Attal also announced the delivery at a later date of a further 12 CAESAR howitzers, 40 SCALP cruise missiles and around 600 AASM airborne guided bombs (50 each per month). On 14 March, the Bulgarian defence ministry announced it had completed the shipment of 100 BTR-60 armoured personnel carriers to Ukraine.

On 18 March, the Council of the European Union adopted a decision to increase the refinancing of member states’ deliveries of arms and military equipment to Ukraine under the European Peace Facility (EPF) by €5 billion (see [‘A fragile compromise on the EU’s additional military aid for Ukraine’](#)). What is new is that part of the funds will be allocated to the purchase of new AME (probably €1 billion) independently of the existing reimbursements for arms supplied to Kyiv from the member states’ own resources (€2.6 billion) and the funding of the EUMAM Ukraine training mission (€500 million). Countries that supply arms and military equipment to Ukraine bilaterally will be able to deduct these costs from their contribution to the EPF.

