

Russian forces destroy the Dnipro hydroelectric power station. Day 761 of the war

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The situation on the frontline

In the period from 19 to 26 March there was no significant change in the two armies' positions. The principal combat zone is still the area west of Avdiivka along the Berdychi-Orlivka-Tonenke-Pervomaiske line, as well as the area around Marinka. There, the Russians are concentrating their efforts on a front about 50 km in length, making intensive use of aerial bombardment. Guided bombs (mostly 250- and 500-kilogram bombs) are the invaders' greatest asset, and their use is slowly driving the Ukrainians out of their positions. The Russians are also attacking near Chasiv Yar and east of the villages of Terny, Yampolivka and Torske, but without much success. However, they have eased the pressure near Kupiansk, where their attempts to approach this town (ongoing since last summer) have not brought any significant results.

On the scale of the entire front, about 800 km in length (excluding the state border), **the Russians are currently able to conduct offensive operations of varying intensity in only a few sections, not exceeding a total of 100 km. A larger-scale offensive operation would require them to concentrate significantly more forces and resources, including the involvement of strategic reserves, and these are not yet combat-ready.**

Russian air attacks

Over the past week, the Russians have launched a series of massive airstrikes against Ukraine. These were the heaviest strikes in almost three months, in terms of the number of missiles and drones used. The largest of these took place on the night of 21–22 March, when they used 63 Shahed 136/131 drones and 88 cruise & ballistic missiles of various types (including 12 Iskander-Ms, seven Kinzhals and five Kh-22s). The defenders managed to shoot down 55 drones, but only 37 missiles. **The attack was well planned and, thanks to its mass scale and the use of diverse weapons, it made a significant breach in the defenders' air defence system and inflicted heavy damage on the Ukrainian energy infrastructure.** Facilities located in the cities of Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro, as well as in the Sumy, Poltava, Dnipropetrovsk, Khmelnytskyi, Vinnytsia, Ivano-Frankivsk and Lviv oblasts were hit.

Eight rockets destroyed the equipment of the Dnipro hydroelectric power station in Zaporizhzhia, leading to an ongoing halt in electricity production. According to Ukrhydroenergo's chairman Ihor Syrota, the dam is not in danger of being destroyed, but the reconstruction of the power station will require several years of work due to the need for a specialised installation to be manufactured to order. There have been power cuts in many areas of Ukraine, mostly lasting several hours.

The situation is worst in Kharkiv, where the energy infrastructure has been subjected to regular rocket attacks for several months. As a result of the destruction of the heating & power station, the city has been cut off from its main source of electricity and heating. Industry and mining in the Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk oblasts have also suffered. In order to stabilise the energy system, Ukraine has been forced to import electricity on an emergency basis from the grids of Poland, Slovakia and Romania. According to the head of the State Agency for Reconstruction of Ukraine, Mustafa Nayem, some of the energy infrastructure facilities were saved from destruction because the security system has been set up with the experience of the 2022–3 winter air attacks in mind.

Russia also launched airstrikes on 21, 23, 24 and 25 March, and on these days the Ukrainian air defence was quite effective, shooting down most of the drones and missiles. However, some of them did hit their targets, which included energy infrastructure facilities in Odesa. On 24 March, equipment serving the underground gas storage facilities (which is probably the largest reservoir of its kind in Europe, located near the town of Stryi in Lviv oblast) was hit, probably by Kinzhal rockets. According to the CEO of Naftohaz Oleksiy Chernyshov, only part of the above-ground infrastructure was damaged as a result of the attack, which will not significantly affect the functioning of the gas market in Ukraine. The reservoir is located deep underground, and is therefore relatively resistant to missile strikes. This is the first attack of its kind in wartime: until now, the Russians have spared the infrastructure used to transport and store gas.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

On the night of 23–24 March, the Ukrainians carried out an **air strike on Sevastopol using Storm Shadow/SCALP and Neptune cruise missiles & drones**. The command post of the Black Sea Fleet and the landing ships *Yamal*, *Azov* and *Kostiantyn Olshanskyi* (the latter a former Ukrainian Navy ship which the Russians seized in Crimea in 2014) in the repair yard were all hit. So far, no reliable information has emerged on the scale of Russian losses or the extent of the damage to the ships. On the night of 24–25 March, Ukrainian drones attacked a power plant in Novocherkassk, in the Rostov oblast of the Russian Federation, causing a fire and the suspension of some units' operation.

Russian operations against Ukraine

The Ukrainian authorities has categorically rejected Russian accusations of collaborating with ISIS. Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR) has adopted the position that the terrorists' actions were a deliberate provocation by the Kremlin regime. On 23 March President

Volodymyr Zelensky reacted to Russian propaganda, which has accused Ukraine of providing support for the terrorist attack on a concert hall near Moscow, by saying that Vladimir Putin “and other scum” were trying to “put the blame on someone else”. According to HUR, the Russian narrative claiming that the perpetrators intended to flee to Ukraine, where they allegedly had an “exit window” prepared, is a lie, as troops and security forces are stationed on the Russian side in areas near the border, making it impossible to cross it.

Western support for Ukraine

The first group of ten Ukrainian fighter pilots have completed their basic flight training, the UK Ministry of Defence announced on 22 March. The course consisted of language, theory, training-simulator and propeller trainer aircraft flights. The Ukrainians will continue their training in France, where they will undergo advanced flight training on jets (most likely Alpha Jets); only after finishing this stage will they switch to F-16s. The course is not designed for experienced pilots, but for people who have most likely never flown before: this makes it a multi-year process, aimed at supporting Ukraine in the long term. In parallel, experienced Ukrainian pilots are continuing their training on F-16s: the first group is expected to complete it by the summer of 2024.

Spain is preparing to deliver 19 Leopard 2A4 tanks, which are currently undergoing a major overhaul at the Santa Bárbara Sistemas plant in Seville. Their delivery is to be carried out in two stages: ten tanks will be sent before the end of June, and a further nine in September. These vehicles have been withdrawn from service in the Spanish land forces, and Madrid has been trying unsuccessfully to sell them for years.

Czech media revealed that **Prague has donated a further four Mi-35 attack helicopters to Kyiv**. The Czech Republic had already made donations of this type of aircraft before: as of October 2023 it had delivered a total of four Mi-35s. Before February 2022, the country's armed forces included ten Mi-35 helicopters and seven Mi-24DU/V helicopters (which have now been completely withdrawn from service), but only eight could be donated, due to their technical condition.

Ukraine's military potential

On 20 March, Ukraine's Operational Command North confirmed that construction of defensive lines has been ongoing for several months in the border area of Chernihiv oblast, and a system of engineering barrages is being established (for more details, see '[Ukraine: belated expansion of the fortification system](#)') **in case of a new Russian attack**. The military is cooperating with civilian construction companies.

On 22 March, the commander of the Ukrainian Land Forces, Oleksandr Pavliuk, indicated that Russia was creating a new troop grouping of more than 100,000 soldiers. He admitted that **Russia's plans for the use of this new force are unknown, but it is possible that the enemy will launch a new offensive in the summer**. He stressed that the Russians are not forming a strike grouping which would be capable of attacking Sumy oblast.

On 21 March, Ukraine's prime minister Denys Shmyhal declared that there was still no need to mobilise a further half a million troops. According to him, mobilisation on such a scale is not necessary, as rotations in the frontline units are still proceeding, and deliveries of combat equipment are continuing. At the same time, he stated that Ukrainian forces would be able to continue fighting provided they received further support in the form of artillery shells and long- & medium-range rockets.

Contrary to the Prime Minister's moderate statement on mobilisation, on 24 March Commander Pavliuk assessed that "Russia could defeat Ukraine with the aid of the Ukrainians themselves", due to the public's negative attitude towards the work of the recruitment commissions. He pointed out that moral support for those evading military service is currently increasing in Ukraine. He recalled that refusal to fulfil the constitutional duty to defend the country is illegal. Pavliuk's statement that the media was responsible for depreciating the authority of military commissions met a sharp reaction from journalists. An [article](#) in *Ukrainska Pravda* recalled the corruption scandals which have been uncovered in military commissions: by the beginning of this year, more than 300 criminal proceedings had been initiated.

Russia's military potential

In the self-proclaimed para-state of Abkhazia, the Russians are finalising the construction of port infrastructure for Black Sea Fleet vessels, which began last October. On 20 March, Georgian media [published a video](#) documenting the progress of work on constructing a barracks for personnel to service the naval base. Kyiv announced that the Abkhazian base would become the next target of attacks by Ukrainian forces.

The war and the internal situation in Russia

On 26 March, the President of Ukraine removed Oleksandr Danilov, who had held the post of Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council (NSC) since autumn 2019. His place has been taken by Oleksandr Lytvynenko, the former head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (FIS), who has been associated with the structures of the NSC for many years. No official reason was given for the change. It may represent the implementation of President Zelensky's announcement in February this year that he would make a number of personnel and structural changes to state bodies. The new head of the HUR, Oleh Ivashchenko, comes from a military intelligence background, which may indicate that it the HUR will now be in charge of the so-called civilian intelligence.

In response to appeals from partner countries, on 20 March the Ukrainian government closed access to a virtual list of 'international war sponsors' posted on the website of the National Anti-Corruption Agency. The Ukrainian justice ministry acknowledged that the dissemination of information about companies whose products usually reach Russia through intermediaries would not be possible "without resolving the issue at the legislative level". This means that the Ukrainian side has acknowledged the demands of its Western partners that information which does not clearly confirm direct contact between Western companies and Russia does harm to their business image. Currently, users of the website

are being redirected to the National Security and Defence Council's '[State Sanctions Register](#)' [subpage](#), which contains information on the foreign entities on which Ukraine has imposed official restrictions.

On 22 March Mykhailo Podolyak, an advisor to the head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, denied US media reports suggesting that Washington was calling for an end to attacks on Russian refineries. Olha Stefanishina, the deputy prime minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, pointed out that the oil processing facilities on Russian territory are a legitimate target for Ukraine from a military point of view. As she put it, in this respect Kyiv is indeed acting in accordance with NATO standards.

