

## The President of Ukraine has lowered the conscription age to 25. Day 769 of the war

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 The situation on the frontline

**In the last ten days of March, Russian forces drove the Ukrainian defenders out of three villages west of Avdiivka** (Orlivka, Tonenke and Vodiane) and captured most of Berdychi, which lies to the north of them. The capture of Orlivka has enabled the invaders to make a relatively unproblematic advance to the western side of the line of ponds, which are linked by the Durna river, and to attack the village of Semenivka from the south; fighting over this locality is currently underway. According to some sources, at the beginning of April the invaders also crossed this river from the side of Berdychi, moving to the edge of Semenivka from the north as well. Meanwhile the seizure of Tonenke and Vodiane has allowed them to develop their attack south of the line of ponds and to approach the Umanske-Netailove road, which is the Ukrainian defence's last potential outpost before the Karlovsky Reservoir. It has also made the situation more difficult for the defenders at Pervomayske (south of Vodiane), where clashes have been continuing for several months now.

**The Russian advance calls into question the possibility of whether the Ukrainians can organise effective resistance along the hastily constructed second line of defence.** The seizure of Semenivka opens up the possibility for the invaders to move towards the Ukrainians' rear in the area of Umanske; the latter may then need to prepare another line of defence, most likely to the west of the Karlovsky Reservoir and the River Vovcha. Of the belt of Ukrainian positions formed north and west of Donetsk in 2015, only Krasnohorivka remains under their control. However, as the invaders advance south and north of it (Heorhiivka and Nevelske respectively), it will become increasingly difficult to hold the town.

**Russian forces operating to the west of Bakhmut have seized Ivanivske and the central part of Bohdanivka, and have advanced to the outskirts of Chasiv Yar.** However, from the preparations the Ukrainian side is making for further fighting, it appears that the eastern part of this town will be subject to so-called delaying operations, and that the new line of defence will be based on the Donetsk-Donbas canal. Its importance as a defence perimeter is limited by the fact that it runs underground in several sections. The invading troops have also made further ground advances in the vicinity of Siversk, south of Marinka (the defenders now only hold the western part of Novomykhailivka) and south of Orikhiv, but these have not translated into an overall change in the situation.

**At the end of March, in the region of Berdychi, the Russian army used small combat robots on a tracked chassis** equipped with AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers in an assault for the first time. These machines supported an attack by an infantry subunits, during which at least two of them were destroyed (as claimed by an attack drone company of the Ukrainian 47th Mechanised Brigade). However, the small scale of their use and the conflicting reports from each side do not allow for a reliable assessment of the combat value of this new weapon.

#### Russian air attacks

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**The invaders continued to launch pinpoint strikes against Ukraine's energy infrastructure, and launched another massive attack on 29 March.** The Ministry of Energy of Ukraine and DTEK, the largest private electricity supplier, confirmed that three major heat and power plants (Burshtynska in Ivano-Frankivsk oblast, Ladyzhynska in Vinnytsia oblast, and the state-owned Centrenergo Zmiivska in Kharkiv oblast) were affected in the attacks, which began on 22 March (during which all the power units were destroyed or severely damaged). As a result of the current and previous attacks, DTEK was said to have lost 80% of its generating capacity, and five of the six heat & power plants it owns were severely damaged. The plants attacked on 29 March (the Dniester and the Kaniv in Dnipropetrovsk oblast) were damaged to a lesser extent. However, there are contradictory reports about damage at the Kremenchuk hydroelectric power station in Poltava oblast; according to the local military administration, it was not actually hit. Damage to power and fuel infrastructure was also reported from the Kirovohrad, Lviv (on 24 and 29 March the Russians again hit installations near the city of Stryi) and Odesa oblasts.

**In its attacks on the Ukrainian forces' hinterland in the frontline areas, the Russians have expanded their use of Iskander-M ballistic missiles,** but missiles from S-300 systems and aerial guided bombs of increasing weight (up to 1500 kg) continue to dominate. In late March and early April, the targets included Dnipro city (18 civilian residents were injured in the attack on 2 April), Kryvyi Rih, Mykolaiv, Odesa and Zaporizhzhia. Kharkiv city has come under almost daily attack. In total, from 27 March until the morning of 3 March, the invaders used 122 rockets and 141 Shahed drones. The defenders claimed to have shot down 42 rockets and 127 drones.

#### Ukrainian operations against Russia

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**On 2 April, Ukrainian drones attacked facilities in Tatarstan, where one of the main facilities of the Nizhnekamsk refinery was hit,** but apart from a brief fire, the strike caused no serious damage. There was an unsuccessful attempt to strike Yelabuga, where the target was a plant producing Geran kamikaze drones, a licensed version of Iran's Shaheds; instead of the industrial facilities, the Ukrainian drone hit a workers' hostel. However, the attack confirmed that the Ukrainians can now attack targets far from their own borders (a month earlier, their drones had been hitting targets in Nizhny Novgorod oblast, which is also over 1000 km from the line of contact). It was also the first attack of its kind since Russia's so-called presidential elections. The border regions of the Russian Federation, mainly Belgorod

oblast, are still constantly being targeted by Ukrainian strikes.

#### Western support for Ukraine

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**New information on military support for Ukraine has been provided by France and Germany, mainly in the form of supply announcements.** On 26 March, French defence minister Sébastien Lecornu announced the delivery of 78 155-mm CAESAR howitzers and 80,000 artillery shells of the same calibre. On 31 March, he announced his intention to hand Kiev “hundreds” of VAB twin-axle armoured personnel carriers (while acknowledging that these were old weapons), as well as a batch of Aster 30 missiles for SAMP/T (Mamba) air defence systems. The transporters are expected to arrive in Ukraine in 2024 and early 2025. On 28 March, Germany reported a new military support package, the most significant part of which is a tranche of 18,000 155-mm artillery shells. Earlier, German media reports indicated that 10,000 of these shells will come from the Bundeswehr’s stocks. Berlin has also pledged to provide a further 20 Marder infantry fighting vehicles and missiles for Patriot systems in the future. In addition, Germany intends to finance the purchase of 180,000 artillery shells, which are to be delivered to Ukraine in the second half of this year.

#### The war and the internal situation in Ukraine

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On 2 April, **Volodymyr Zelensky signed a law lowering the age for conscription from 27 to 25.** The document had been awaiting his signature since last June. On the same day, the President also approved a law abolishing the status of a person with limited capacity to perform military service and requiring the verification of his medical certificate.

However, these measures do not mean that the entire package of legal changes related to mobilisation, which is currently being discussed in parliament, will be implemented any more rapidly. Nor do they guarantee that the mobilisation will continue effectively, not least because of the difficulties involved in drawing up a full register of individuals subject to compulsory military service.

**The laws Zelensky has just signed do meet some of the army’s demands.** On 27 March, the defence ministry presented the key points of the draft law: mobilisation will cover men from 25 to 60 years of age; basic military training will be introduced in colleges from 2025; conscription service will be replaced by basic military service lasting five months in peacetime and three months in wartime; citizens who have reached the age of 18 can opt for basic military service, but at the same time they can receive a deferment until they reach mobilisation age. Work on the law has been the subject of protracted discussions and disputes in parliament. This is due to fears that its adoption will cause public discontent, including resistance from economic actors who fear losing their employees.

In *a survey published on 1 April by the Institute of Social and Political Psychology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*, **53.9% of respondents expressed the view that those evading military service should be shown understanding, due to their understandable fear of death.** At the same time, 43% of the respondents “are ashamed of men who hide from mobilisation”. The survey’s conclusions indicated that ‘anti-mobilisation’

sentiment could pose a serious challenge to the government.

#### Ukraine's military potential

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**More drones.** On 27 March, the Ukrainian Defence Procurement Agency placed orders for the purchase of 3000 DJI Mavic 3E drones (which cost around \$3400 per unit) and 1000 DJI Mavic 3 Thermal drones (around \$5000 per unit) for the armed forces. Ultimately, 20,000 drones are to be delivered. In March, the government allocated an additional 5 billion hryvnia (around \$130 million) for the purchase of drones.

**More fortifications.** On 2 April, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal announced that the government had allocated an additional 5.6 billion hryvnias (more than \$140 million) to construct fortifications in the Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Sumy, Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts. He added that 20 billion hryvnias (about \$500 million) had already been set aside from the state budget this year for such work across the country. Fortification work is underway in Kyiv oblast, where a system of trenches, shelters and anti-tank ditches reinforced with 10,000 concrete barriers is being expanded.

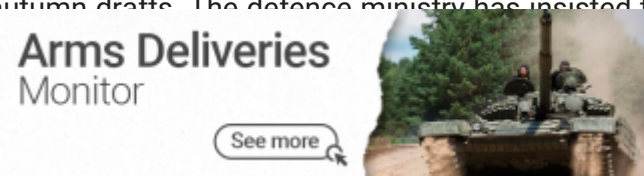
**Fewer troops.** On 29 March, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Oleksandr Syrskyi, announced that there was no need to mobilise a further half a million men, and that the number required had been “significantly reduced”. The deployment of “several thousand” soldiers to the frontline had been made possible by reviewing formations which are not directly involved in the fighting. Syrskyi stressed that “citizens, once conscripted, are sent to the front after undergoing training” (which usually lasts about two months). Exceptions are made for those with combat experience.

#### Russia's military potential

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On 28 March, Reuters reported that **the Russian Federation had increased fuel imports from Belarus due to the risk of shortages** following Ukrainian attacks on oil refineries. In the first half of March around 3000 tonnes of petrol were delivered from Belarus to Russian customers; in February such deliveries amounted to just 590 tonnes, and in January there were none at all.

**On 31 March Vladimir Putin signed a decree on the start of spring conscription.** It will run from 1 April to 15 July, with 150,000 people aged between 18 and 30 to be conscripted into the army. In 2023, a total of 277,000 people were drafted for military service in the spring and autumn drafts. The defence ministry has insisted that conscripts will not be sent to the



front.