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Ukraine's defences are weakening. Day 796 of the war

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The situation on the frontline

Russian forces have deepened and widened the breach in the Ukrainian group in the area of Ocheretyne, although the defenders are holding on to the town's eastern outskirts. The Russians have also seized Solovyove and Novobakhmutivka, which lie south of it. They have also captured Novokalynove (6 km east of Ocheretyne), creating a 'bulge' between the two towns in which the remaining Ukrainian forces in the area are contained. The closest point of support for the defenders is Arkhanhelske, which lies in a depression to the north of the aforementioned towns. The Russians have a threefold numerical advantage in the area of Ocheretyne: they number around 10,000 troops compared to 3000 defenders. Nominally, the Ukrainians still have a stronger group of seven brigades (which if fully complemented would number around 30,000 troops) against one division and two Russian brigades (20,000–25,000 troops), but each of the Ukrainian brigades is only capable of fielding one battalion at most. This means that the Russians are deploying around half of their group (taking its nominal size into account), while the Ukrainians are deploying only around 10% of their initial strength, indicating extreme exhaustion on the part of the defenders.

In Krasnohorivka, the Russians have captured most of the industrial area in the south of the town, and the fighting has moved to its centre. They also managed to break through the defences on the north-eastern outskirts, and are threatening the Ukrainians with a strike on the town from a new direction. To the west of Avdiivka Russian forces have pushed the defenders out of the villages of Semenivka and Berdychi, thus consolidating themselves on the west bank of the Durna river.

After a break of several weeks, the Russian group on the border of the Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts has resumed its activity. South-east of Kupyansk, Ukrainian forces had been pushed out of some of their positions, while south-west of Svatove, the Russians are about to reach the outskirts of Makiivka on the Zherebets river. South of Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia oblast, Russian units have driven the defenders out of Robotyne, whose seizure in August 2023 marked the climax of the Ukrainian offensive; however, fighting is continuing on its northern outskirts. By contrast, further Russian attacks in the Chasiv Yar area, to which the Ukrainians have directed further reinforcements, have not been successful.

Despite the visible progress they are making at the front, there is no sign that the Russians are building an offensive group to turn their tactical success into an operational success. T

heir main objective remains the maximal dispersal and exhaustion of the defenders, and the advances they have been making in field are the result. Reports from the area of Ocheretyne indicate that at least some of the Ukrainian units have been decomposed to an extent that precludes their further use according to their nominal manpower levels. How much of this is due to the culling of personnel and the inability to replenish them, and how much to a shortage of ammunition and equipment, remains unclear. An additional problem is the relative lack of fortified defensive positions. The example of Chasiv Yar confirms that both the rotation and reinforcement of fighting troops and pre-prepared lines of defence are necessary to successfully deter the invaders. In areas where the Ukrainian command has not shown sufficient determination to organise defences and still lacks adequate reserves, the Russian advances are undeniably faster than they have been in previous months.

Russian air attacks

On 27 April, the Russians carried out another massive attack on energy infrastructure, damaging four thermal power plants: Dnieper and Krivyi Rih in Dnipropetrovsk oblast; Burshtyn in Ivano-Frankivsk oblast and Dobrotvir in Lviv oblast. A Naftohaz transmission facility in the region of the city of Stryi was also damaged. According to the Ukrainian Air Force Command, the invaders used a total of 34 missiles, of which the defenders shot down 21. For the first time after a long pause, the Russians used more Kalibr missiles fired from submarines (six or eight, three or six of which were reportedly neutralised). However, for the first time since the start of the war, the missile attack was not accompanied by a kamikaze drone strike.

The Russians have intensified their rocket attacks on railway infrastructure and airports. On 25 April, the railway logistics hub in Smila in Cherkasy oblast, the railway station in Balakliia in Kharkiv oblast, and an unspecified railway infrastructure facility in Udachne in Donetsk oblast were damaged. On 27 April, rockets struck the airport in Dnipro, and two days later the town of Myrhorod in Poltava oblast. According to some sources, airfields in Mykolaiv oblast (27 April) and Khmelnytskyi and Chernihiv oblasts (28 April) were also attacked. In addition, on 28 April enemy rockets struck a shipyard in Mykolaiv and an 'industrial facility' in Zaporizhzhia. Kharkiv, Sumy and Odesa were attacked at least twice: in the latter city, five people were killed and 32 wounded in the 29 April attack. In total, between the evening of 23 April and the morning of 30 April, the invaders used 70–72 rockets, of which the defenders reportedly neutralised between 20 and 23. In contrast, the use of Shaheds was significantly reduced: only one attack with them was reported during the period in question, and all four of the drones used were shot down.

Western support for Ukraine

On 24 April, Washington announced the first billion-dollar military aid package funded from the sum newly approved by the US Congress (for more details, see '*The new US supplemental bill on Ukraine and the threat to confiscate Russian assets*'). The supplies will be transferred under the Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) special authority mechanism, which will enable the use of US Army stockpiles, and they will be delivered to

Ukraine in the near future (deliveries from US bases in Germany and Poland are already scheduled). The package envisages the transfer to Kyiv of items including HIMARS guided missiles, Stinger and RIM-7 Sea Sparrow anti-aircraft missiles and AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles (the latter two types will be used with FrankenSAM improvised ground launchers), 155-mm and 105-mm calibre artillery munitions, Javelin and TOW anti-tank guided missiles and AT4 grenade launchers, precision-guided aerial bombs, Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M113 transporters, and armoured vehicles including MRAPs. The Pentagon did not disclose numbers, but expert estimates are that at least 14 Bradleys, 41 JLTV or L-ATV armoured vehicles and 234 MRAPs are to be delivered, as well as seven 155-mm howitzers (most likely M777), although this latter has not been confirmed. This package will not eliminate the shortage of equipment and ammunition, but it will allow the rapid reinforcement of subunits on the most vulnerable sections of the frontline.

The centrepiece of the Ramstein-format meeting on 26 April was the US's announcement of a $6 billion military aid package. The funds are to be earmarked from the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), meaning that they will be used for industrial procurement, with equipment and ammunition deliveries taking place over a longer time horizon (up to several years). The package will finance the purchase of missiles for Patriot and NASAMS air defence systems, equipment for the integration of Western anti-aircraft missiles and radiolocation stations with post-Soviet systems (FrankenSAM), missiles for HIMARS launchers, guided missiles with laser guidance (probably 70-mm APKWS), radar stations and counter-battery radars, 155-mm and 152-mm artillery munitions, airborne precision-guided munitions, Switchblade loitering munitions and Puma reconnaissance UAVs, and – for the first time – what are described as 'components to support Ukrainian drone production'.

Other countries announcing aid packages included Canada (sending $10 million for the Czech initiative to purchase munitions, $2.3 million for the production of drones in Ukraine and 100 more (after the previously promised 800) Teledyne FLIR drones; Spain (missiles for Patriot systems and 155-mm & 120-mm artillery munitions, and over the next few months Leopard tanks, armoured combat vehicles and towed howitzers) and Belgium (€200 million for the German initiative to supply air defence systems, and anti-aircraft missiles from its own stockpile). Canada has also confirmed that this summer it will deliver the first 10 armoured personnel carriers of the 50 which it announced last September.

Washington has confirmed that ATACMS ballistic missiles, including those with extended ranges, were included in the $300m extraordinary support package announced in March. US media revealed that Ukraine had received more than 100 missiles with a range of 305 km as well as a larger, unspecified number of missiles with cluster warheads with a range of 165 km. They were probably used by the Ukrainian side for the first time on 17 April during the attack on the airport of Dzhankoi in Crimea (the destruction of elements of the S-300W4 system battery there was eventually confirmed) and have been used systematically since then, mainly in strikes against targets on the occupied peninsula.

On 29 April, Germany reported further deliveries of previously announced military equipment to Ukraine. The package included 10 Marder infantry fighting vehicles, 120-mm tank ammunition, 7500 pieces of 155-mm ammunition, a Skynex anti-aircraft artillery system with ammunition, 30,000 35-mm shells for Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns,

missiles for IRIS-T SLM air defence systems, and a TRLM-4D radar station.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

The Ukrainians continued attacks on Russian territory, mainly on fuel infrastructure facilities. On 24 April, fuel depots in Yartsevo and Razdorovo in Smolensk oblast were targeted; a fire broke out at one of the facilities. A drone crashed in an industrial zone in Lipetsk, but there were no reports of damage. **On 27 April, as a result of a massive strike on Krasnodar krai, refineries in Ilskiy and Slavyansk in the Kuban were hit** (the latter had to partially halt production) as was the Kushchovskaya airfield (one warehouse was destroyed). According to Russian data, the Ukrainians used 66 kamikaze drones in this attack.

The strikes carried out on 28 April on the Belgorod, Bryansk, Kaluga and Kursk oblasts did not have significant results; neither did the missile attacks (most likely using ATACMS missiles) on Crimea, near Yevpatoria (28 April) and Dzhankoi & Simferopol (30 April). Russian oil infrastructure facilities are increasingly protected from drone strikes by the use of metal scaffolding and nets.

Ukraine's military potential

An increase in the size of the border service is being planned. On 24 April, the Ukrainian parliament passed a bill providing for the expansion of the State Border Guard Service (BGS) by 15,000 people. The total size will be 75,000 people, including 67,000 military personnel. However, this will only take place within a year of the end or suspension of martial law. This is to ensure that the border service is resourced with soldiers who have frontline experience, and will serve to strengthen the defence of the border with Russia after the end of the war. It is also linked to planned organisational changes in the BGS; its structure will be based on new units of brigade strength which will if necessary be able to carry out full-fledged combat operations.

Mobilisation controversy. An order by the Council of Ministers on 23 April suspended the provision of consular services (including the issuing of new passports) to men of military age (18–60 years). This suspension "is temporary in nature, and is related to the need to resolve the issue of military registration of citizens of military age residing abroad". It has not yet been revealed what mechanisms will be put in place to regulate this issue. On 24 April, the Ministry of Defence reminded the public that the new regulations governing conscription will come into force as of 18 May, and one of the most important changes is the introduction of the obligation for men to update their data (including their place of residence) within 60 days of that date. If a person fails to do so, he or she will be placed on the police's wanted list; a request may also be made to the court to revoke his or her driver's licence and impose a fine of up to 25,000 hryvnias (c. $600). If they fail to pay it, the evader will be entered in the debtors' register, which will restrict their ability to use bank cards. In turn, consulate staff will be able to refuse to issue a passport to Ukrainian citizens abroad who fail to update their data. The government's stipulation is presumably aimed at preventing men subject to conscription from obtaining passports abroad *en masse* during

the transitional period and before the law comes into force.

On 25 April, the Ministry of Defence indicated that men residing outside the country do not need to return to Ukraine to update their data, as from June they will be able to use an electronic account or submit the relevant documents at consular offices. This is in response to a wave of public criticism indicating that depriving men of consular age of access to consular services is a restriction of their civil rights.

According to a survey by the Foundation for Democratic Initiatives, 25% of Ukrainians said that most of the people in their immediate circle are trying to avoid mobilisation, while 47% noted that some of their acquaintances are avoiding serving in the army, while the rest are ready to report to the military commissions. The predominant desire among respondents is to avoid being sent to the front. The results of the survey indicate that 3% of those questioned are serving in the defence forces, 7% of respondents were willing to join the army as part of the mobilisation process, and 9% were prepared to do so if the hostilities approach their place of residence. At the same time, 35% intend to focus on working and providing non-military assistance to those fighting at the front, 24% were focused on 'surviving the war', and 5% said they are willing to go abroad.

The situation in the occupied territories

On 25 April, the Ukrainian authorities indicated that the Russians in the occupied territories intend to verify the residents' rights of ownership to the plots of land, dachas and flats they use by 12 June. The condition for obtaining confirmation of ownership is to have Russian citizenship; the property of those who do not hold a Russian passport will be considered 'abandoned' and will subsequently be nationalised.

