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Russian terrorist attacks on Kharkiv. Day 824 of the war

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The situation on the frontline

Last week, Ukrainian troops stabilised the frontline in the Kharkiv oblast. Fighting is still taking place over the hills that tower over the village of Lyptsi and around Vovchansk, but Russian forces have failed to gain any more ground. In the latter direction, their advance has been halted on the Donets and Vovcha rivers. Fighting in the Kharkiv oblast over the past two weeks has revealed a number of structural problems in the Ukrainian army, which was unable to stage an effective delaying action in the border zone in the face of the expected attack.

The Ukrainian setbacks in the first days of fighting resulted mainly from the low numbers of the covering units, which had not received any reinforcements for a long time. The organisation of defence and command at the tactical-operational level was also inadequate, as evidenced by the dismissal of two successive commanders of the Kharkiv group of troops. However, after personnel changes were made and reinforcements were brought in, the advance of the Russian troops was quickly halted.

At the current stage of the war, the Russian military is not in a position to form a new large strike force and correlate its operations with its activity in other directions. The operation in the Kharkiv oblast was primarily carried out by troops that were brought in from the neighbouring section of the battlefront (elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army, the 6th Combined Arms Army and the 11th Army Corps), rather than the newly formed strategic reserves.

There have been no significant developments on the Donbas front in recent days. Russia's heavy artillery shelling and aerial bombardment of Chasiv Yar has been aimed at destroying the residential and industrial buildings that form the basis of the Ukrainian defences. Most of the Russian assaults on the city's outskirts on the eastern bank of the Donets–Donbas canal have been repulsed, with the attacking forces suffering heavy losses. Russian forces have made only minimal advances in this area. Ukrainian units have also succeeded in stabilising the frontline in the Ocheretyne area, where Russian pressure has eased considerably compared to what we saw in late April and early May. However, Russian forces made minor gains near the villages of Umanske and Netailove 15 km west of Avdiivka.

On 25 May, **the Ukrainian State Bureau of Investigation opened proceedings against 28 military officers holding command positions in four units** (the 125th territorial defence brigade, the 23rd mechanised brigade and the 415th and the 172nd independent infantry

battalions). The charges relate to their failure to organise the effective defence of positions on the border of the Kharkiv oblast, which resulted in casualties and the loss of military equipment. The highest-ranking suspect is General Yuri Halushkin, former commander of the Operational-Tactical Group of Troops 'Kharkiv'.

Russian air attacks

Between 21 and 28 May, Russia primarily struck facilities located in the Donetsk, Kharkiv and Sumy oblasts near the frontline. **Kharkiv suffered the worst damage as Russian attacks hit civilian targets, bearing the hallmarks of terrorism.** Russia has been systematically destroying Ukraine's critical infrastructure and major industrial and commercial facilities in an effort to break the population's will to resist and drive residents out. On 23 May, Russian forces struck Kharkiv and the surrounding towns with more than a dozen S-300 missiles. A large printing plant was destroyed, killing seven of its employees in the rubble. Kharkiv was Ukraine's main printing centre before the war; as a result of the recent attacks, the city's largest printing plants have either been destroyed or forced to relocate. On 25 May, Russian forces dropped two aerial guided bombs on the Epicentr construction hypermarket, killing at least 18 of its employees and customers. This is the seventh hypermarket of this chain that has been destroyed during the war; several others have been closed due to the threat of shelling. In addition, Russian aerial bombs and rockets fell on several other sites in Kharkiv in the past week, destroying residential buildings, offices and city infrastructure.

Ukrainian defence capabilities against guided aerial bombs and S-300 missiles are very limited. The main reason is the insufficient number of air defence systems capable of shooting down Russian aircraft that drop bombs from deep inside Russian territory. At the same time, the existing ban on the use of Western cruise and ballistic missiles against targets on Russian territory makes it impossible for Ukraine to destroy the missile systems that are deployed there and have been used to shell cities such as Kharkiv. A separate problem is the increased activity of Russian surveillance drones. These fly more than 100 km deep into Ukrainian territory controlled by its armed forces, where they regularly identify targets and calibrate attacks on cities such as Odesa, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro and Kharkiv. The Ukrainian side has limited capabilities to shoot down these drones due to a shortage of ammunition for its short- and medium-range air defence systems.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

According to unofficial reports, on 23 and 26 May, Ukrainian attack drones damaged two Russian long-range radar stations near Armavir in Krasnodar Krai and near Orsk in the Orenburg oblast (close to the border with Kazakhstan, some 1,800 km from the front line). The extent of the reported damage remains unknown.

Russia's military potential

On 23 May, the Governor of the Voronezh oblast, Aleksandr Gusev, announced an **increase in the amount of one-time allowance paid to those who report for contract service in the Russian armed forces**. It currently amounts to 700,000 roubles (c. $7,900), which is roughly equivalent to the average annual earnings in the region. Voronezh is the fourteenth Russian region to report an increase in this allowance. In some administrative units, it is as high as one million roubles (c. $11,000). This trend reflects Russia's growing problems in recruiting more soldiers for its war effort in Ukraine.

Ukraine's military potential

On 22 May, **the Ukrainian parliament passed a law on the system of basic general military training in educational institutions**, which will be introduced in secondary schools (grades X and XI) and higher education institutions. This training will include subjects such as pre-medical aid with elements of tactical medicine, topography, combat tactics and operating drones.

On 24 May, the head of the Main Directorate of Defence Planning of the General Staff of Ukraine, General Yevhen Ostrianski, announced that the **staff's upcoming overhaul would reduce its personnel by 60%**. This reform provides for abolishing a number of military organisational structures, creating new ones and optimising the existing ones. The redundant personnel will replenish the command structures at operational and tactical levels as well as frontline military units, which will facilitate a partial rotation.

On 27 May, the Ukrainian defence ministry reported that **more than 1.1 million men subject to military service had updated their personal data using the 'Reserve+' mobile application, which is available in 176 countries**. It is most commonly used in Poland, Germany, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The statement acknowledged that only 14,000 registered men are residing abroad.

The war and the internal situation in Ukraine

On 22 May, the management of Ukraine's state railways Ukrzaliznytsia asked the government to allow all employees who are crucial for the smooth flow of transport to file claims for exemption from military service, citing staffing shortages. The company says that about 76% of its positions are currently filled. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, more than 12,000 of the company's employees have been called up; more than 1,500 of them have returned to civilian life.

Western support for Ukraine

On 27 May, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Oleksandr Syrskyi, signed **documents formalising the presence of French military instructors in Ukraine**. Talks are currently underway to establish the terms of their presence and responsibilities. Syrskyi also expressed the hope that other partners would soon join this project.

On 27 May, **President Volodymyr Zelensky and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez signed *an agreement on security cooperation*** in Madrid. Spain will provide Ukraine with €1 billion in military aid by the end of this year and another €5 billion by 2027. The document includes provisions on bilateral military cooperation in spheres such as integrated air and missile defence, artillery, armoured equipment, maritime security, information technology and mine clearance. The Spanish Prime Minister described the agreement as a memorandum that does not require ratification by parliament.

On 28 May, **the Ukrainian President signed a *similar agreement* in Brussels with Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo. Belgium pledged to provide €977 million in military aid to Ukraine by the end of this year. The document states that Belgium will send 30 F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine by 2028** and support it in the areas of air force/air defence, maritime security, mine clearance and as part of the coalition to supply ammunition. Belgium is the eleventh country to have concluded a 10-year bilateral agreement on security cooperation with Ukraine. Previously, Ukraine has signed similar documents with the UK, Germany, France, Denmark, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Finland, Latvia and Spain.

On 22 May, **Sweden set up a special fund to provide Ukraine with military support worth a total of 75 billion kroner (€6.53 billion) in 2024–26.** Swedish military aid to Ukraine will amount to 25 billion kroner per year, matching the sum allocated for this purpose in 2022–23. The fund is designed to allow for medium-term planning. On 21 May, the Swedish Defence Materiel Administration (FMV) signed a contract of undisclosed value for an unknown number of CV9035 infantry fighting vehicles. Sweden had earlier declared that it would purchase 35 CV9035s for Ukraine, 25 of which would be funded by Denmark.

On 24 May, **the US administration announced another package of military support for Ukraine worth $275 million**. Under the Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA), ammunition for HIMARS launchers, 155-mm and 105-mm howitzers and 60-mm mortars, additional TOW and Javelin anti-tank guided missiles, AT-4 grenade launchers and guided aerial bombs will be transferred from US Army depots.

On 24 May, Danish media revealed that all **of the 20 Leopard 1 tanks that had been delivered by last September (there are now 40 of these) were faulty**. So far, Denmark has delivered less than half of the planned 100 Leopard 1 tanks, which were supposed to arrive in Ukraine in 2023. The problems have mainly been related to the fire control system and the cannon; they resulted from a lack of spare parts that the German company KMW was supposed to provide. The Danish defence ministry has said that these problems have now been resolved and that the number of Leopard 1 tanks delivered to Ukraine should rise to 90 very soon.

