

Ukrainian diversion in Belgorod region. Day 1126 of the war

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski

The situation on the frontline

The Russians are continuing their offensive operations in the Donbas and the Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia oblast, but the pace of the advance remains relatively slow. They have made slight progress on most sections of the front, including by reoccupying Krymske which is part of the Toretsk agglomeration, but this does not change the overall situation. The resumption of the Russian advance took place west of Niu-York, where relative calm had prevailed for the past few months. According to some sources, Russian troops occupied two villages there. Ukrainian forces successfully counterattacked on the border of the Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts, where they managed to recapture the village of Nadiya, located in the latter (three villages in Luhansk now remain under Ukrainian control), as well as in Toretsk and in the vicinity of Kupiansk and Pokrovsk.

On the border between the Kursk and Sumy oblasts, the Russians pushed Ukrainian forces into the Sudzha border crossing area. They also widened the area of operations in Sumy Oblast, attacking the village of Vodolahy, which lies to the west of the previous combat area. During the clashes on 21 March, the Sudzha gas transmission measuring station was destroyed, with each side accuse the other of responsibility for this.

Ukrainian forces are continuing a diversionary operation on the border between the Sumy and Belgorod oblasts, 30km south of Sudzha. After initial setbacks, they have succeeded in gaining a foothold in Demidovka, on the Russian side of the border (this came about after a change in tactics – instead of mechanised columns, the Ukrainians are now fighting using small groups of infantry supported by drones). The clashes are still limited in nature and have not forced the Russians to redeploy additional forces from the Sudzha area, which was most likely the objective of this Ukrainian diversion.

Russian air attacks

The Russians carried out further massive strikes on railway infrastructure behind the frontline. Damage was reported to facilities in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (19 and 20 March) and Kirovohrad Oblast (20 March). In an attack carried out on the night of 18–19 March, Ukrainian railway energy facilities were damaged, contradicting Vladimir Putin's earlier announcement (after a conversation with President Donald Trump) that attacks on such infrastructure would be halted for several hours.

The missile strike on Sumy on 24 March injured 101 people and damaged residential buildings and civilian infrastructure in the city centre. **Kyiv had been the target of a massive drone attack two days earlier.** Destruction was reported in six areas of the city, three people were killed and ten injured. The Ukrainian capital was also attacked on 21 March. Russian drones also hit Dnipro and Kropyvnytskyi (19 March), Odesa (20 March) and Zaporizhzhia (21 and 24 March). Kyiv Oblast remains a constant target for Russian drones (damage to residential and/or industrial facilities was reported on 19, 21, 23, 24 and 25 March).

The number of strike drones and their imitators used by the Russians during the week has again exceeded 1,000. According to communiqués from the Ukrainian Air Force Command (UAFC), from the evening of 18 March to the morning of 25 March, Russia used a total of 1,094 drones, of which 593 are thought to have been downed and 358 locationally lost. These statistics confirm a further decline in the effectiveness of Ukrainian air defence. The UAFC's data shows that 143 drones were able to hit their targets – the highest weekly number since Russia began attacks using strike drones and for the first time above 100. However, the Russians' use of missiles remains relatively low, of which, according to Ukrainian data, they used 12 (none were shot down) during the period in question.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

On 20 March, Ukrainian drones attacked the Russian Engels strategic air base in Saratov Oblast. Satellite images confirmed hits on storage facilities and, according to the Ukrainian General Staff, there was a detonation of the ammunition located there. According to some reports, the attack also allegedly targeted a local fuel depot and a refinery in Saratov. In total, on that day, the Ukrainians allegedly used at least 225 drones to strike Russian territory (according to Russian data), making this the second largest attack after the one carried out on 11 March (at least 337 drones were used).

On 19 March, drones struck an oil pumping station in Kropotkin in Krasnodar Krai, causing a fire that lasted several days. Among others, the Marinovka airfield in Volgograd Oblast (21 March), Chapayevsk in Samara Oblast and Rostov-on-Don (22 March) and Kropotkin again (24 March) were attacked without much success.

Western support for Ukraine

Germany will allocate an additional €3 billion in military support to Ukraine in 2025 and €8.25 billion between 2026 and 2029, German Finance Minister Jörg Kukies announced on 19 March. Berlin had previously earmarked €4 billion for military aid in the current year. The allocation of additional funds was made possible by the Bundestag voting through constitutional amendments exempting defence spending from debt limits.

Ukraine's military potential

On 19 March, **the 62nd consecutive 175-for-175 exchange of prisoners of war took place** on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. In addition, the Russian side released 22 seriously

injured Ukrainians. The event was facilitated by the United Arab Emirates. More than 4,300 prisoners of war have been brought to Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale aggression.

On 20 March, **the Public Anti-Corruption Council – an advisory body to the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine – reported that the ministry is still interested in purchasing 120 mm calibre mortar grenades from a state-owned manufacturer that has repeatedly failed to meet its obligations.** The council decided to publicise the issue because of the constant disruption in the supply of ammunition to the front caused by a monopoly defending its position in the market. It therefore called for the president (in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces) to consider a proposal to require purchasers to diversify their sources of ammunition purchases. This will avoid a situation where a rogue manufacturer or supplier can completely disrupt the supply of a particular type of ammunition to the frontline. The president is to ask law enforcement agencies and the Ministry of Defence to disclose the results of the investigation into the supply of low-quality 120 mm ammunition and to oblige those responsible to publicly announce the amount of defective ammunition that has been returned to the manufacturer.

On 21 March, Ukrainian human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets reported that **the number of complaints about unlawful actions of military commissions during conscription had increased since the beginning of the year.** So far, 40 notifications have been received indicating that conscripts were brought to the commissions using physical coercion, often causing injuries (for example, in Kharkiv Oblast, two cyclists were hit by an army vehicle and, after being overpowered, were taken to the conscription centre).

On 21 March, the Security Service of Ukraine outlined five basic ways to illegally evade mobilisation. These are: organising illegal border crossings, issuing false certificates of the need to confirm professional qualifications (e.g. aircraft pilots) abroad, issuing documents certifying the care of disabled children, confirming the alleged maintenance of a large family, and issuing certificates of disability. The price of the 'services' ranges from \$5,000 to \$13,000.

On 24 March, the Ukrainska Pravda news website published a statement by British Colonel Andy Boardman, responsible for the implementation of the Interflex programme of support to the Ukrainian army. He confirmed that, **as of July 2022, more than 52,000 soldiers had been trained in the UK** and that the scale of desertion did not exceed 1%.

Also on 24 March, **President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the Ukrainian army would be intensifying its programme of conscripting men aged 18 to 24 into contract service.** He noted that the number of brigades interested in accepting young volunteers had increased and that the possibility of conscripting them into the National Guard and the State Border Service was being considered.



Russian operations against Ukraine

On 23 March, **the customer service systems of Ukrainian state railways crashed as a result of a Russian cyber-attack.** However, despite repeated attempts, it failed to paralyse train traffic.

On 20 March, **Putin signed a decree ordering Ukrainians residing in the Russian Federation (including occupied territories) without 'legal grounds' to leave its territory by 10 September** or 'legalise' their stay by taking Russian citizenship. The decree should be seen as a symbolic act intended to confirm the final 'de-Ukrainianisation' of the annexed regions. The Ukrainian foreign ministry saw it as another step in Russia's campaign of discrimination, persecution and forced displacement of Ukrainian citizens.

