

## The Ukrainian-Russian battle of the flags. The offensive that never was

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On 12 August, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Ukraine had recaptured 745 km<sup>2</sup> of territory and 26 settlements in a large-scale offensive operation conducted by the Air Assault Forces together with sub-units from other formations on the Oleksandrivka axis, at the junction of the Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. The operation unfolded in two phases: from January to May and from May to August.

Zelensky's statement, based on a report presented to him by the new Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Mykhailo Drapatyi, has drawn sharply divergent reactions from military observers and OSINT sources. Some have challenged the account, arguing that it relied on overinterpretation, manipulation or even outright falsehoods, while also viewing it as detrimental to what they regard a necessary overhaul of the Ukrainian military. According to their estimates, since last February Ukraine has regained control of around 150 km<sup>2</sup> of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, mostly territory that had remained in the grey zone and away from the main areas of Russian operations. Russia has presented its own counter-narrative, producing numerous materials intended to demonstrate that the areas mentioned by Zelensky remain under its control.

Zelensky's statement should be seen as part of an effort to create a morale-boosting narrative. Ukraine has not conducted, and is not conducting, an offensive in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast or on its periphery, as it lacks sufficient forces and resources to do so. However, Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups have managed to penetrate deep into Russian-held territory and display Ukrainian flags in a number of settlements, creating the impression that the scale of Ukrainian operations was much greater than it actually was. Russian forces have carried out similar actions in the area. In both cases, claims of territorial control on this basis misrepresented the situation on the ground.

### Commentary

- **Reports of a large-scale Ukrainian offensive operation in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast do not correspond to the situation on the ground.** Russian forces occupied the south-eastern fringe of this oblast as part of efforts to secure their operations in Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, which Russia claims as part of its territory. Unlike the main Russian axes of advance in the Donbas and in Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, the area was relatively lightly manned, while Russian control over most settlements after Ukrainian forces had been pushed out was largely nominal. The Ukrainian command exploited this

situation last February to stage a relatively low-cost military demonstration, involving the display of flags, intended to divert attention from setbacks on other sectors of the front. Parts of the Western information space, including the US-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW), helped promote the narrative of a successful counteroffensive. The ISW published maps showing purported Ukrainian advances in line with Kyiv's account, although Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian OSINT sources challenged their scale as greatly exaggerated.

- **The Ukrainian army lacks the forces and resources to conduct an offensive on the scale of its operations in Zaporizhzhia Oblast in the summer of 2023**, or even one comparable to its operation in Russia's Kursk Oblast in 2024. Although it has deployed two corps comprising a total of over a dozen brigades and regiments on the Oleksandrivka axis, these units are considerably weaker than those previously available to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, fielding far less artillery and armour and facing personnel shortages. Drones cannot compensate for these shortfalls in any potential offensive. The main task of these forces was to blunt the Russian advance following the loss of Huliaipole, an objective that was largely achieved. Some Ukrainian sources suggested that their mission was to retake the town, but this was beyond their capabilities.
- **The Ukrainian narrative of a successful counteroffensive was built around infiltration operations aimed at displaying the national flag as deep as possible inside Russian-held territory.** Videos and photographs showing flags are among the main forms of evidence used to confirm or challenge one side's control over a given area. However, claims based on such evidence can only be deemed credible if flags are displayed repeatedly over an extended period and/or at multiple locations within the same settlement. By contrast, flag displays presented as evidence of an offensive operation on the Oleksandrivka axis were most often one-off events. Both sides combined material from different periods or even circulated fabricated videos and photographs – with Russia constructing its own mirror-image narrative – but these were quickly detected and exposed by OSINT observers.
- **Russian forces were the first to employ the 'quick flag' tactic, but the Ukrainian military soon adopted it**, applying it on an unprecedented scale during this year's operations in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. It is worth noting that flag displays have very rarely accompanied local attempts by Ukrainian forces to seize the initiative on key sectors of the front, concentrated recently primarily around Lyman in Donetsk Oblast.