

As war enters fifth month, Russia takes Severodonetsk, attacks other cities in the Donbas



UK Ministry of Defence update on Ukraine, June 27.

On Feb. 24, after formally recognizing and signing treaties of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance with the “People’s Republics” created by pro-Russian separatists in portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” in eastern Ukraine to protect the people who “have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.” The “special military operation” was in fact a full-fledged, multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine from Belarus in the north, Crimea in the south and Russian territory adjacent to eastern and northeastern Ukraine, accompanied by intensive attacks by artillery and missiles on many cities throughout the country. Initially focused not only on eastern Ukraine but also on the Kyiv region, the territory between Kyiv and Kharkiv, and southern Ukraine adjacent to Crimea, in late March, after the attack in the Kyiv region had stalled in the face of strong resistance, Russia shifted the focus of its “special military operation” to eastern Ukraine and proclaimed as its main objective the “liberation” of the Donbas.

With the “special military operation” now in its fifth month, and three months after the focus of the “operation” was shifted to the Donbas, the war continues to be a grinding battle for territory and control of the many cities of eastern Ukraine. One of the most prominent targets since the focus shifted to the Donbas has been Severodonetsk, a city of 100,000 (prior to the war) in the Luhansk region. Russia launched a prolonged attack on the city, its citizens and its infrastructure that was reminiscent of its prolonged attack on Mariupol in the southern portion of the Donetsk region. And as with the Azov steel plant in Mariupol, the last bastion of resistance to the attack in Severodonetsk was the Azot chemical plant. But after several weeks of putting up a stubborn and courageous defense, on Friday the Ukrainian forces withdrew and the Russians quickly

moved in. And as they did, they turned their attention immediately to Lysychansk, another city of roughly 100,000 (prior to the war) just to the west, on the other side of the Siverskyi Donets River. If and when Russia forces Ukraine to withdraw its troops from Lysychansk – and the only realistic question at this point probably isn't if but when – it will control all of the cities of Luhansk region. At that point, Russia's attention will turn to several major cities in the Donetsk region just to the west of the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk pocket – most notably, Kramatorsk, a city of roughly 160,000 (pre-war) and, only ten miles away, Slovyansk, a city of roughly 110,000 (pre-war) – as well as the substantial portion of territory in the Donetsk region that is still controlled by Ukraine.

Notwithstanding Ukraine's withdrawal Friday from Severodonetsk, an announcement that day by Russia's Ministry of Defense suggested that Putin and his advisers are not happy with the way the war has been conducted. The ministry announced several changes in the command of Russian forces operating in Ukraine. Gen. Alexander Lapin, the commander of the Central Military District since 2017, has been put in charge of the "central group" of forces – the forces that took Severodonetsk that day and are now attacking Lysychansk. And more intriguingly, it announced that Gen. Sergei Surovikin, since 2017 the commander of Russia's aerospace forces and previously the commander of the Eastern Military District, has been put in charge of the "southern group" of forces. What makes that announcement intriguing is the fact that in late March Gen. Aleksandr Dvornikov, the commander of the Southern Military District (and widely-known as the "butcher of Syria" for what the forces under his command did there in 2015-16), had been placed in charge of the "special military operation" to "liberate" the Donbas. The defense ministry did not announce that Dvornikov had been removed as head of the Southern Military District and in charge of the "special military operation." But on Saturday, the UK Ministry of Defence reported it is "highly likely" that Dvornikov, as well as several other generals, have been removed from their operational command roles. Reportedly, Gen. Gennady Zhidko, who served for several years as commander of the Eastern Military District and has served since late 2021 as Deputy Defense Minister and head of the Main Military-Political Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces, has replaced Dvornikov and is now in charge of the overall "operation" in Ukraine. Yesterday, as Russia continued a barrage of air- and sea-based missiles aimed at Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa and other cities, as well as training facilities in the west of the country, Zhidko accompanied Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu on an inspection visit of Russian command posts in eastern Ukraine. And so, with new commanders in charge, the "special military operation" to "liberate" the Donbas continues.

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