

## Russian troops move into Bakhmut, replace Prigozhin's Wagner Group



Destroyed apartment building in Bakhmut (photo from Ukrainian Armed Forces).

Last Saturday, Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose private military company, the Wagner Group, has been at the forefront of Russia's prolonged effort to take the largely destroyed city of Bakhmut in Donetsk region in eastern Ukraine, claimed that, after more than seven months of intensive fighting, his troops had finally taken control of the city. On Telegram, he announced that, "Today on May 20, around midday, Bakhmut was taken in its entirety. By May 25 we will completely examine [the city], create the necessary lines of defense and hand it to the military. We ourselves will go into field camps." Ukraine disputed the claim; Hanna Maliar, Ukraine's deputy minister of defense, said on her Telegram channel, "Heavy fighting in Bakhmut. The situation is critical. As of now, our defenders control certain industrial and infrastructure facilities in the area.... Our forces have taken the city in a semi-encirclement, which gives us the opportunity to destroy the enemy.... The enemy has to defend himself in the part of the city he controls." Nevertheless, that evening President Putin congratulated the Wagner assault units as well as the personnel of the Russian armed forces who had provided support and protected the flanks, on the completion of the operation to "liberate" the city. (As the photo above suggests, "liberation" for Putin means destruction.)

On Tuesday, Maliar wrote on Telegram that "In the city of Bakhmut, the fighting has decreased, the enemy continues to clear the areas under its control." But, she added, "Our troops control the southwestern outskirts of the city in the 'Litak' district." And she said Ukrainian forces had made some progress "on the flanks to the north and south of Bakhmut." Nevertheless, as he had said would happen on May 25, on Thursday Prigozhin announced in a video posted on Telegram that the Wagner Group had started to withdraw its forces from Bakhmut and transfer its positions to the Russian troops:

“We are withdrawing the units from Bakhmut. From today at five in the morning, May 25, until June 1, most of the units will rebase to camps in the rear. We are handing our positions to the military.” Malia later said in a message also posted on Telegram that “In Bakhmut’s outskirts, the enemy has replaced Wagner units with regular army forces. Inside the city itself, Wagner fighters remain.” She also said Russia was reinforcing its positions on the flanks of Bakhmut and shelling Ukrainian forces to try to stop Ukrainian forces from advancing in an encircling movement to the north and south of the city.

Today, in another statement on Telegram, Malia said that, while Russian forces have continued attacking, “overall offensive activity has decreased. Yesterday and today there are no active battles there – neither in the city nor on the flanks. Instead, the enemy is actively shelling the outskirts of the city.” She added, “The decrease in the enemy’s offensive activity is due to the fact that troops are being replaced and regrouped. The enemy is trying to strengthen its own capabilities.” She added that Ukrainian forces continue to “firmly hold” the heights overlooking the city from the north and south, as well as a portion of the outskirts, but haven’t advanced over the past two days in order to focus on “other tasks.” What those “other tasks” were she didn’t say. But Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of Ukraine’s ground forces, posted a video today which, he said, showed Ukrainian special forces operating inside Bakhmut.

The battle for Bakhmut may be over. But it is likely to resume when Ukraine launches its long-anticipated counteroffensive. And that may happen very soon. In a Telegram post this morning, Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, commander in chief of Ukraine’s armed forces, said in a short informational video released by the armed forces and encouraging people to join the military, said, “The time has come to take back what is ours.” And also today, Oleksiy Danilov, the Secretary of Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council, when asked by the BBC when the counteroffensive will begin, did not of course name a date. But he did say it could begin “tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, or in a week.”

David R. Cameron  
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