

U.S. proxy war: Kakhovka dam and the weaponization of water

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Kakhovka dam flooding.

June 7 — Tuesday morning, just a few hours after the first serious Ukrainian attacks against Russian positions began in various areas of the Donbass and Zaporozhye

fronts, a prelude to the major offensive that Ukraine has been announcing for months, the bursting of the Kakhovka dam immediately diverted the focus of attention from the alleged Ukrainian advances to the part of the southern territories furthest from the battle.

Novaya Kakhovka and the Soviet dam built in the times of Stalin and Khrushchev are already familiar to those who have closely followed the course of the war. In the initial phase of the Russian intervention at the end of February 2022, the Ukrainian command prioritized the defense of Kiev and sacrificed territorial battalions in areas of secondary importance such as the southern front, where the Russian advance came with virtually no resistance. From Crimea, Russian troops reached the Dnieper River in just a few days and shortly after captured the city of Kherson, on the right bank of the river, which they would lose after their defense became impossible in the autumn of that year.

Throughout the summer, Ukraine had begun preparing the ground for a counteroffensive to regain control of Russia's most vulnerable territories: those north of the Dnieper, whose defense was made impossible by destroying the infrastructure linking both banks of the Dnieper. Target of the newly arrived U.S. HIMARS [multiple rocket launchers], the Antonovsky bridge was at that time one of the major targets, but not the only one. The bombardments of Novaya Kakhovka were not spontaneous or sporadic, but a planned destruction strategy to make the situation of Russian troops at key strategic points untenable. The same can be said of the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant, located in the town of Enerгодар, also south of the Dnieper, and still under Russian control.

Cities and towns flooded

The partial collapse of the dam yesterday has led to the flooding of a whole series of towns and cities in the area. In the morning, the mayor of Novaya Kakhovka reported that the rise in the water level exceeded 12 centimeters per hour. The

water affected the city of Kherson, the most populated town in the area, although in a clearly less serious way than other cities. In Novaya Kakhovka, a few hours after the dam breached, water rose up the pedestal of the Lenin statue, and swans glided through the empty center of the flooded city in a post-apocalyptic scene about the effects of war in the post-Soviet world.

The accusations were not long in coming and both Russia and Ukraine alleged sabotage on the other side. Ukraine put in place the mechanisms both to react to what happened and evacuate the population from the affected towns, and to achieve the maximum possible political and informational benefit. Without having to wait for a minimal study on whether the dam had collapsed due to deliberate demolition or the effects of previous bombings, the Western press and political class en masse took Russia's guilt for granted. In the same way as with what happened after the Nord Stream explosions, the media and politicians of all countries and ideologies began to look for why it was in Russia's interest to blow up the dam.

Thus, the argument of last autumn was revived, when the possibility of the humanitarian and environmental catastrophe that occurred yesterday was first raised publicly. At the time, Russia accused Ukraine of planning the dam's destruction, an argument that was denounced by Ukraine and its partners as a nonsensical conspiracy theory. The aim, according to Russia, would have been to flood the lands on the left bank of the Dnieper under Russian control and force Russian troops back or drown in their positions. Ukraine, for its part, accused Russia of planning to blow up the dam to prevent its troops from advancing on that territory. Unlike the Russian accusation, the Ukrainian one, although nonsensical since the Russian troops were preparing trenches in that area of the Dnieper at that time, was disseminated by the media, giving it credibility.

Something similar happened yesterday, and the nuances or clarifications, such as "the BBC has been unable to verify either the Russian or Ukrainian allegations,"

were the exception rather than the rule. And for the moment, it has not even been possible to confirm if the collapse was due to an attempted sabotage, to the consequences of the usual Ukrainian bombings, or simply to the accumulation of damage in recent months.

Rush to judgment

Since the Russian withdrawal from the territories on the right bank of the Dnieper, which provided protection for the territories on the left bank as they kept Ukrainian troops at a greater distance, the safety of the dam and its workers has been compromised. What is naive is to think that the work of reconstruction and repair of the damage caused by the Ukrainian bombings could be carried out. Blaming Russia for the collapse due to poor conservation – without taking into account the circumstances and the Ukrainian bombing — has been one of the four main positions shown throughout the day yesterday.

This position can be seen in the person of David Puente, Italian “verifier” and collaborator of Facebook in that verification task, who made this argument just as he did last September about the Nord Stream explosion. Then also, Russia was guilty because of the lack of maintenance of the gas pipeline.

The second position, maintained by Ukraine and the Western political class, has limited itself to taking Russia’s guilt for granted and arguing that it is a scorched-earth policy in the face of alleged Ukrainian advances on the front, although, in this area, there have not been such advances. “It is the children, women and men of Ukraine who will suffer the consequences of the terrible destruction of the Nova Kakhovka hydroelectric plant,” wrote the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, adding that “it is an act against humanity. A war crime that cannot go unanswered. Today, more than ever, Ukraine needs our help.”

Even clearer in her message, Ursula von der Leyen stated that “Russia will have to

pay for the crimes committed in Ukraine. The destruction of the dam, an intolerable attack on civilian infrastructure, puts thousands of people in the Kherson region at risk,” she wrote, later pledging help through available civil protection mechanisms.

“It is not yet clear what caused the dam to collapse,” the BBC admitted yesterday. However, politicians and journalists from all over the European continent have already passed sentence.

Forgetting its supposed neutrality, the Ukrainian Red Cross accused Russia of a war crime in messages that it was later forced to delete. Without accusing either side, the International Committee of the Red Cross recalled that “the dams enjoy special international protection under international humanitarian law, since they contain dangerous forces which, if released, can lead to severe suffering for the civilian population.”

Thousands of people on both sides of the Dnieper are being affected right now. As Dmitry Steshin recalled, the territories under Russian control are at a lower altitude, so it is that area on the southern bank of the Dnieper that will be most affected. Russia has mobilized its resources to also evacuate thousands of people affected in localities in the area, some of which, like Aleshka, are difficult to access and have a very complicated situation. The explosions that appeared in several videos taken by the population of the area - spontaneous explosions in the mines displaced by the river’s rise - show another of the dangers of what happened.

Without the need for any investigation or assessment of the damage and with the absolute certainty that Russia is always guilty, journalists like Paul Mason quickly showed their anger, the third of the four positions that were repeated throughout yesterday. “Russia has blown up the huge dam on Kherson, risking a catastrophe at the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant,” wrote the journalist, who appears to have believed Zelensky’s claim that the nuclear power plant is in imminent danger and not that of the International Atomic Energy Agency’s director. The IAEA, whose

representatives have access to the area, stated that this danger does not exist at the moment. The plant requires water from the Kajovka reservoir, so the risk does not exist in the short term. Going beyond assignment of blame and future effects, lasexta.com said: "Stalin already used water as a weapon of war in Zaporizhia in 1941: the USSR destroyed the Dneprostoy dam and caused more than 20,000 deaths."

Washington Post reported Ukraine test strike

Finally, there were also those who yesterday wanted to see the bright side of things. Carl Bildt, a professional hawk, lamented that the destruction of the dam "will cause extensive flooding mainly on the left bank of the Dnieper," describing the part of the river under Russian control, "complicating any military operation," that is, the Ukrainian advance. "But, I suppose, it also deprives the Crimean canal of its water."

That the Crimean canal is drying up again a year after the demolition of the wall built by Ukraine to deprive the peninsula of running water seems to be the positive part of what happened for certain sectors of the European establishment. In Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov confirmed that, given that possibility, the peninsula had proceeded to fill the canal to its limits. Crimea may have to live without that supply again in the coming months, just as it did during the years when Kiev used its flow control of the Dnieper as collective punishment against the population.

None of the four positions mentioned - lack of maintenance, prosecution by default, anger or the search for benefits for Ukraine - take into account the precedents of recent months, in which Ukraine has not hesitated to attack and endanger critical civil infrastructure.

It's also been convenient to forget something that, despite having gone unnoticed at the time of its publication, became relevant yesterday. In December 2022, the Washington Post published a report in which the commander of the Ukrainian forces

in the Kherson region confirmed that Ukraine had considered blowing up the Kakhovka dam. "Kovalchuk considered the possibility of flooding the river. The Ukrainians, he claimed, even conducted a test strike with a HIMARS launcher against the gates of the Nova Kakhovka dam, punching three holes in the metal to see if the Dnieper water could rise high enough to destroy the Russian crossings without flooding the nearby towns.

The Washington Post not only confirmed that the Russian accusations were not a conspiracy theory, but that the Ukrainian attacks, which have continued ever since, could have caused the damage necessary for the collapse without the need for sabotage.

Translated by Melinda Butterfield

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