

Conflict Update # 367

February 25th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 147,470 (650) soldiers killed, 3,375 (+12) enemy tanks, 6,609 (+9) armored combat vehicles, 2,373 (+10) artillery systems, 475 (+1) MLRS systems, 244 (+0) air defense systems, 299 (+0) warplanes, 288 (+1) helicopters, 2,035 (+2) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 873 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,235 (+11) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 230 (+1) units of equipment.



Key Takeaways

We need ammo – Russian forces up and down front lines have been appealing for ammunition as stocks run dry.

Wagner Group leader Prigozhin even published photographs of slain soldiers from his battalions, demanding ammunition, citing shortages as the reason why his soldiers are dying in such great numbers, and Russian bloggers have been lambasting the Kremlin because of this basic yet critical battle deficiency.

The reason for shortages? – Ukrainian forces have been tracking and destroying supply depots ever since the illegal invasion began last February.


Russia enjoys a decided numerical advantage in equipment and soldiers over Ukraine, estimated at 4:1 or 5:1. Ukraine's primary defensive (offensive when required) course of action, is to target Kremlin supply routes, depriving them of ammunition supplies, fresh troop rotations, replacement equipment and so on. No matter how superior in numbers they are, the "numbers" cannot operate sans ammunition and supplies.

The success of Ukrainian tactics in this regard is evidenced by the growing (Russian) shortage of ammo as being (frantically) reported all along their front line positions.

Looking at the map below, Kievan Intelligence tracked inbound Russian supply chains from Rostov-on-Don, shown as **1**, where fresh supplies from Russian factories are received by train and ship, transhipped to local trains, then freighted to storage points close to front lines.

Fresh stocks move along the black dotted line from inside Russia to various arms depots inside Ukraine, where they are unloaded and stored pending demand, finally being trucked the final yard.

Ukrainian Intelligence continually identifies precise geolocations of these arms depots, supply and assembly points. Earlier this week they did just that, identifying 4 depots in an arch along the rail line.

Using HIMARS longer-range missiles, they struck all four, shown as  in area **2**.

Yesterday they similarly struck Mariupol **3**, also where supplies and fresh troops come from - 11 times - with their new longer-range missiles (as reported in yesterday's Update), destroying a number of depots in and around the city.

Shown as **4** in the map, are the areas from where Ukrainian HIMARS and other mobile missile platforms are launching these projectiles. Located some way behind front lines for protection and concealment, they dispatch rockets and missiles, then rapidly relocate to avoid enemy detection.

With new longer-range weapons, Kyiv can now stage from even further back, making it all the more difficult for Russian detection systems to track them and respond.

Ukraine also struck Russian arms depots further north in Luhansk, adding to enemy ammunition shortages.

Small wonder that Russian front line battalions are critically short of this most basic, yet most critical, means of attack.



Belarus readying missiles for combat as Ukraine enters second year of war - Belarus is in the process of readying missiles for combat as the war in Ukraine enters its second year.

In a Telegram post on Friday, the Belarus MoD shared a video of several vehicles transporting missiles and wrote that "as part of combat readiness measures, one of the missile units is moving to the designated area."

On February 18, the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine said that "Military Intelligence of Ukraine is monitoring the actions of Russian forces in the territory of Belarus around the clock and the attempts of the terrorist country to fully involve the Belarusians in the war against Ukraine."

Russia to launch a massive offensive, warns EU's Borrell - "It is clear that Russia is going to launch a massive offensive," EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell said in an interview published yesterday, adding that "Europe will be in danger" if Russia wins the war "because Putin is not going to stop there."

"We know from the satellites surrounding Ukraine that it [Russia] has mobilized its strategic aviation at the airfields," Borrell told Spanish newspaper El Periodico.

"As soon as the weather conditions allow it, it [Russia] will continue with the offensive that it has already started. But she will do it with greater intensity," Borrell said. "Ukraine is part of the West and Putin wants to take it away from us."

Russia rapidly building up Crimea's defenses, Intelligence report reveals - Ukrainian military officials warned on the one-year anniversary of the war that Russia is swiftly working to bolster its defense of the Crimean Peninsula.

"In Chaplynka [Kherson region], the occupiers imposed a round-the-clock curfew from February 23 to February 25, 2023," said an intelligence update posted on Facebook by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine at 6 p.m. local time Friday. "The reason may be the transfer of military equipment from the temporarily occupied part of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea to reinforce the defense line."

Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in 2014, is viewed by Ukrainian President Zelensky and top military brass as a pivotal region that might ultimately define the war because of Ukraine's desire to fully reoccupy the territory it views as its own.

On Thursday, Ukraine hacked two Russian radio stations on the peninsula. A recorded message by Major General Kyrylo Budanov, chief of the defense intelligence of Ukraine, was played.

"Ukraine is taking back all of its occupied territories," Budanov said. "The Donbas and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea will be coming home forever."

It is due not to the optics themselves but also is based on Kyiv's perspective of the treatment of Crimea's Ukrainian population under Russian control—notably members of the Indigenous population of Crimean Tatars who have been continually oppressed.

Ukraine's military said Russia had doubled the number of ships on active duty in the Black Sea and predicted this could be in preparation for more missile attacks.

Russia claimed its forces continued their attack in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region on Friday, killing up to 240 Ukrainian soldiers over the past 24 hours.

How US-supplied shells crammed with anti-tank mines helped defeat a brigade of Russian marines in the battle for Vuhledar - Ukraine's use of US-supplied remote anti-armor mines has helped stop Russian forces and destroyed its tanks and armored vehicles in the Donetsk region, where fierce fighting has been raging.

Multiple videos have circulated on social media appearing to show Russian tanks driving into minefields and exploding. A renewed Russian offensive at Vuhledar began at the end of January involving the 155th Marine Brigade of the Pacific Fleet, according to reports.

Almost the entire brigade of 5,000 was destroyed near Vuhledar, with troops killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi, head of the united press center of the Tavriskiy District of Ukrainian defense forces, told Politico on February 12.

Part of the reason for Ukraine's military success in countering Russian forces around the coal-mining town has been their use of US-supplied Remote Anti-Armor Mine system (RAAM), according to reports.

The Remote Anti-Armor Mine system is a 155mm howitzer shell containing nine anti-tank mines, seen in the illustration below. When the shell is fired over an open area, the tiny mines are scattered widely onto the ground.

This means that Ukrainian forces can lay the mines from a distance rather than by hand, as is typically the case with traditional land mines.

Since last year, the US has sent Ukraine at least 7,200 RAAM shells in its aid packages.

Russian forces have struggled to counter Ukraine's mines, particularly RAAM shells raining from above.



Ukrainian soldiers have proven very wily. They wait for Russian forces to clear a path through a minefield before firing new mines into the freshly cleared path, Forbes reported. The Russians then advance thinking they have cleared a path through only to find quite the opposite.

Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

Putin's wartime bluster obscures Russia's precarious future - The grim realities of Russia's war in Ukraine — tens of thousands dead, international isolation and a declining quality of life — are not part of the alternate reality of nationalist fervor created by the Kremlin's propaganda machine.

But the future of Russia is bleak, experts told The Hill on the anniversary of the war, with Putin showing no signs of letting up and the Russian people facing rising uncertainty over how it will end.

"Certainly Putin ... he basically threw his country back decades," said Anna Vassilieva, director of the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies.

"I always say we'll have that blood on our faces for generations now, because of what he did. And that's a terrible burden — we are lucky if there's no nuclear war."

Putin has so far weathered military defeats and has maintained a stranglehold on the minds of his people — even as his war is increasing the threat of nuclear weapons use to its most dangerous point since the Cold War, and his military commits atrocities of murder, rape and torture.

Comprehensive insight into Russian public opinion is difficult to gauge, as the government has criminalized opposition and acts of protests are quickly and brutally stamped out.

The Russian state has so far shown an ability to weather sanctions pressure, thanks largely to the Kremlin's ability to prop up its economy through energy exports, helping protect against mass discontent.

Illicit and creative shipping through third-countries and domestic production are replacing imports blocked by Western sanctions, helping to backfill Russian military supplies and easing the squeeze on a population of people who are told they are victims in a war waged by the West.

“Let me reiterate that they were the ones who started this war, while we used force and are using it to stop the war,” Putin said in a major address to the Russian legislature on Tuesday.

There are presently few, if any, good options to compel Putin to withdraw his troops or bring about a secure cease-fire to halt the fighting.

Advocates for dialogue warn against focusing solely on military superiority, raising alarm that pushing Putin too tightly into a corner may trigger unpredictable and irrevocable consequences — a fear stoked by the Kremlin’s nuclear saber-rattling.

But Ukraine’s strongest supporters say that serious dialogue with Putin is folly, as he has demonstrated a disregard for holding to any commitments beyond his own ambitions.

Yet the challenges of holding Russian society together will only grow as Putin’s war rages into its second year.

Given Putin’s refusal to back off his maximalist ambitions, U.S. and European officials are doubtful of an opening, in the short term, for negotiations.

“President Putin has too much to lose on one hand to go for negotiations, at this point he feels he can get further gains,” the European official told reporters on Feb 17.

And Ukrainians, holding the front line under a battering from Russia targeting energy and civilian infrastructure, are resolute in their ability to further push Russian forces out.

“I think we should all be focused on one thing: Even if we are deadly tired, we cannot allow ourselves to get tired of fighting for freedom,” Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told the Munich Security Conference this month.

Kyiv has talked about pushing Russia out of all its territory, including the parts seized in 2014 and in particular the Crimean peninsula, a major military base and staging ground for Moscow.

While U.S. officials have reportedly expressed doubt over Ukraine’s ability to retake Crimea, they are public about the need for the peninsula to be a main focus of any settlement.

“Ukraine is not going to be safe unless Crimea is at a minimum, at a minimum, demilitarized. And that is part of ensuring that there is a sustainable deterrent,” Victoria Nuland, undersecretary of State for political affairs, told the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on Feb. 16.

Comfort Ero, CEO of the International Crisis Group, said in a briefing with reporters that ICG is advocating for Ukraine’s military and diplomatic backers to “dangle some incentives in front of Russia, should it show a willingness to stop the war and to pull back from Ukraine.”

“These are unpalatable options right now, both for Ukraine and Russia,” she said, but added the goal is to avoid pushing Putin into a corner, “and what he does as a result of that is not clear. And then he may then push for an ugly settlement and that would, I think for the Ukrainians, be a serious concern.”

Chinese Peace Proposal - US President Joe Biden said he saw nothing in the Chinese plan “that would be beneficial to anyone other than Russia.”

Ukrainian children taken to Russia brings back fear, memories of a similar Nazi effort - Early last October, a smiling senior Kremlin official named Maria Lvova-Belova disembarked from a Russian military jet in Moscow with 53 children she claimed were orphans she'd rescued from the war zone in the contested Donbas region of Ukraine.

The "orphans," ranging in age from nine months to five years, would soon join 350 others who had been adopted, and begin their new lives in Russia, the Kremlin said, as part of President Vladimir Putin's ambitious effort to place children from war-torn Ukraine with families in Russia.

According to Putin's office, the head of the Russian-occupied Donetsk oblast had "requested their evacuation to safe areas of the country," claiming that some of the children "need lifesaving assistance and rehabilitation."

U.S. and Ukrainian officials portray the trip by Lvova-Belova, pictured here as commissioner for children's rights, as something far more sinister. They say Lvova-Belova is the public face of one of the most distressing consequences of Russia's year-long war in Ukraine: The deportation, including by coercion, and force, of potentially tens of thousands of Ukrainian children without their families.



The numbers vary widely, from a conservative estimate of 6,000 by one recent U.S.-funded study to more than 400,000 when taking into account the full scope of activities by Russian proxies like community leaders in Kremlin-held areas of Ukraine.

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Some children have been returned, often after protests and intervention by Ukrainian authorities or non-governmental child advocacy organizations. But an unknown but large number of them – ranging in age from four-month-old infants to teenagers as old as 17 – may never be reunited with their loved ones back home, according to those officials and humanitarian groups focused on Ukraine.

Hundreds of the youngest victims, they say, already have been adopted by Russians, with Putin's encouragement, while thousands of others are being fed Kremlin propaganda in pro-Russia "re-education" camps.

U.S. and allied authorities say they are only now beginning to comprehend the true scale of the crisis given the intentionally opaque nature of an organized Russian effort that has been underway since before tanks and troops first crossed the border a year ago.

Comment – This is similar to Nazi tactics where specialized squads conducted raids such as these.

Sanctions

EU approves 10th package of sanctions on Russia over Ukraine war - The EU has approved a tenth package of sanctions against Russia on the one-year anniversary of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EU officials said.

The latest round of sanctions provides for additional trade restrictions on Russia, the Swedish EU Council Presidency announced in Brussels on Friday evening, and are designed to make financing the war more difficult as well as starve Russia of tech equipment and spare parts for arms used against Ukraine.

Global financial crimes watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF) suspended Russia's membership on Friday, saying Moscow's war in Ukraine violated the organization's principles.

Containment

Ukraine gets huge boost in deadly drone capabilities from US - The US military has announced a new aid package for Ukraine that is packed with drones and loitering munitions, among other things. This includes AeroVironment Switchblade 600s and Jump 20s, CyberLux K8s, and Area-I ALTIUS-600s (pictured right).

This appears to be the first time the latter three types have been included in a tranche of American military assistance for the Ukrainian armed forces. The ALTIUS-600s, especially, could give Ukrainian forces all-new long-range precision strike capabilities, among other potential benefits.

The Pentagon formally announced the new aid for Ukraine's military, which is valued at approximately \$2 billion in total, earlier today. The U.S. government is providing this particular package as part of the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). Unlike U.S. military assistance that comes in the form of so-called 'drawdowns,' which involve transferring materiel straight from its own stocks, USAI provides funds to make direct purchases to support Ukraine.



The Switchblade 600 anti-tank loitering munition

AeroVironment's Switchblade is evolved from the company's smaller Switchblade 300s, examples of which Ukraine has also received straight from U.S. military stocks. Both Switchblade types are man-portable, tube-launched loitering munitions, also referred to as kamikaze drones.

The Switchblade 600 offers even very small units a useful aerial surveillance capability during the day and at night that also comes with the ability to conduct immediate precision strikes on any threats that might be uncovered.

It has a range of at least 40 kilometers (just under 25 miles) and can remain aloft for 40 minutes or more, depending on its exact flight profile. This is significantly greater range and endurance compared to the original Switchblade 300, which can only reach targets around 10 kilometers (just over six miles) away and keep flying for 15 minutes.

In addition, the Switchblade 600 carries the same warhead as the Javelin anti-tank guided missile, giving it heavy anti-armor capabilities that its predecessor does not have. The drone's range and highly automated targeting capabilities give it significant advantages over the multitude of infantry anti-tank missiles, including the Javelin, that Ukrainian forces have access to now.

The biggest advantage is that they can fly well behind the front lines and hunt and kill main battle tanks, even ones that are hiding behind cover. This is a vastly different capability than anti-tank guided missiles that need line of sight from the individual firing the weapon or the platform to work.

In other words, Switchblade 600 leaves Russia's heaviest armor vulnerable up to two dozen miles behind enemy lines and virtually anywhere in Russian-controlled territory when operated by clandestine forces located behind enemy lines.

The vertical takeoff and landing Jump 20

The Jump 20 is a vertical takeoff and landing capable design primarily intended for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions. Contractor-operated examples of the Jump 20 have supported U.S. special operations forces for years now, and the type was selected last year by the U.S. Army as part of its replacement plan for the aging RQ-7 Shadow.

The drone has a single propeller at the front driven by a small gasoline-powered engine for use in level flight and four electrically-powered vertically-oriented propellers for takeoff and landing. It has a maximum range of 185 kilometers (just shy of 115 miles) and can remain aloft for at least 14 hours, according to AeroVironment's website.

A line-of-sight data link gives the drone the ability to send data back to operators or other nodes in near-real-time. Control can be handed off from one node to another to help extend its operating range, as well.



The tube-launched ALTIUS-600

The ALTIUS-600 is another tube-launched drone developed by Area-I. The uncrewed aerial system, which is recoverable and reusable, has a maximum range of around 440 kilometers (276 miles) and can remain airborne for at least four hours, according to Area-I's website.

The drone, which has become increasingly popular within the U.S. military in recent years, can be air-launched via a Common Launch Tube (CLT) or launchers on the ground or even at sea. While the default configuration is geared toward ISR, featuring a sensor turret with infrared cameras, the design is modular, as well.

Area-I says that it can be set up to carry signals intelligence systems, electronic warfare and counter-drone payloads, or even a small warhead. Last year, its parent company Anduril also announced a purpose-built loitering munition derivative called the ALTIUS-600M.



The mysterious Cyberlux K8

There do not appear to be any readily available details about the Cyberlux K8. The company's "Unmanned Aircraft Solutions" webpage shows a variety of other small tri and quadcopter-type designs, a number of which are fitted with commercial still and video cameras.

There is no indication of any connection between Cyberlux's K8 and a toy-like commercial quadcopter with the same model nomenclature from a Chinese company called Qinux that is readily available through online storefronts like Alibaba.

Expanding Ukraine's drone capabilities

Altogether, the array of drones in this new aid package look set to give Ukrainian forces a number of different tiers of additional capabilities. In particular, the Jump 20s and ALTIUS-600s represent a significant leap in terms of range and endurance over many drone types that Ukraine has already received from the United States and other international

partners. Many of the uncrewed aerial systems that Ukrainian forces have received to date are smaller commercial quadcopter types or similar designs.

Considering the payload possibilities and performance these new uncrewed aerial systems come with, they will give Ukrainian forces all new capabilities and offer additional options for carrying out various mission sets. This could include striking targets at extended ranges.

When it comes to the ALTIUS-600, in particular, with its stated range it could become one of Ukraine's longest-reaching strike assets. Right now, Ukrainian forces rely heavily on an ad-hoc mixture of longer-range commercially-available remote-controlled aircraft transformed into strike weapons and missile-like Soviet-era reconnaissance drones refitted with warheads to work as impromptu cruise missiles to conduct long-range stand-off strikes.

Even with only a limited explosive payload, ALTIUS-600s could still be extremely useful for striking a variety of important targets over long-distances, including fragile radar dishes and antenna arrays, ammunition and fuel dumps, lightly armored vehicles, aircraft on flightlines, and small groups of soldiers or even specific individuals. Depending on the networking capabilities that come with them, the drones could potentially be employed against dynamic targets hundreds of miles away. Even without an operator-in-the-loop link, they could still be directed to strike fixed targets with great precision based on static coordinates over very long distances.

Putin & Russia

Putin is 'terribly scared' and 'knows he is in trouble' after a year-long conflict with Ukraine left him in 'such a psychological state he is clinging to any chance to win', says former FSB chief - Putin is 'terribly scared' as he marks the first anniversary of his invasion of Ukraine, says an ex-Russian secret services general.

The Russian dictator has badly misread the West's resolve to stand up to him, and did not realise his army's incompetence, according to the former chief of the Moscow division of the FSB.

'Putin perfectly understands the mood of people who have lost everything because of him,' said retired General Yevgeny Savostyanov. 'He understands this anger can find a way out, so he keeps them away.'

'Putin is now terribly scared. He understands that he is in trouble,' he said.

His problems were self-inflicted by going to war, he added. 'He lived happily [yet] with his own hands, he took and ruined everything. Amazing story.' Now, he is 'in such a psychological state he is clinging to any opportunity to win.'

Yesterday, leaked documents suggested that the FSB mislead Putin about his chances of victory, telling the despot that his forces would seize Kyiv in just three days, and that Ukrainians would welcome Russian soldiers with open arms.

However, February 23rd marks one year since Putin launched the invasion. Russian forces are pinned down in the east, and Volodymyr Zelensky remains president.

And while Russia has managed so far to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions, Savostyanov said thanks to Putin and his invasion of Ukraine - the Russian people 'will live very poorly no matter what - it's already inevitable'.

He predicts a move by Putin and his henchmen to pass on the presidency to an ally less toxic in the West yet a figure who will preserve 70-year-old Putin's circle, in the hope of preventing any kind of domestic revolution.

He suspects this figure will be agriculture minister Dmitry Patrushev, 45, son of Putin's hardline security advisor Nikolai Patrushev, 71, one of the architects of the disastrous war in Ukraine. 'Patrushev's son is named as a possible successor,' said Savostyanov, 70, also a former deputy head of the Kremlin administration who had predicted Putin's unexpected rise to power before the year 2000.

He was seen as a 'suitable figure' who 'will be provided with strong support' to control Russia. And 'in the eyes of the West, he is not too smeared', having had no significant role in the war. Significantly, Putin praised him in his state of the nation address this week.

Yet there was 'no reason for optimism' due to the 'absurdity' of the crisis facing Russia, caused by Putin, Savostyanov told Republic in savage criticism of Putin.

'Russia is slipping down into the role of the leader of the third world, where we are needed only as long as we can give money,' he said.

'The time will come, and [in Russia] we will see empty shelves, goods shortages, people impoverishment, and technological backwardness in all areas.

'One of Putin's mistakes is that at the beginning of last summer, he did not catch the moment that the West stopped being afraid of him and would no longer retreat.

'The **first mistake** is to lead a campaign against the West. The **second** is to believe that in Ukraine, they were waiting for us with flowers and hugs.

'Corrupt propagandists and those who mastered big money allocated for creating the 'fifth column' in Ukraine - this is his mistake.

'The **third** is that he, it turns out, did not know how his own army works. And this is the most amazing thing. The army was built all these years in the expectation that there would be no need to fight in the West,' Savostyanov said.

'The calculation was that Europe is in a hopeless energy situation.

'It can spin as it wants, but it will not do without Russia, so it will again be forced to devour what will be put on the table.'

Putin calculated the West would swallow his hoped-for 'quick victory' in Ukraine, but he got that wrong just as he did not understand his army's incompetence in a 'tragedy of mistakes'. Russia has suffered several defeats in the last year, as well as a series of damaging blows against the Moskva cruiser and Kerch bridge.

'When we see that Russia puts private military companies to the front, in addition to being staffed with an armed criminal element, it denies the very idea of its own statehood,' the former FSB chief said.

Savostyanov predicts that Russia now faces a bleak future. If Putin somehow succeeds in Ukraine he would enact a repressive crackdown.

His angry inner circle 'which has lost everything accumulated over 20 years' would need to be eliminated.

'If the [war] fails, the question will arise - either hard tightening the screws to keep order in the country - or chaos. Under the conditions of sanctions and restrictions, nothing good can be expected from either.'

Despite Putin's desperation, Savostyanov rated the chances of Putin using his nuclear arsenal as slight. 'I can say no more than one per cent that Putin will decide to carry out the nuclear threat,' he said.

'The fundamental difference is that when I predicted who would replace [Boris] Yeltsin [is that the] procedure was obvious. The procedure for replacing Putin, frankly, is not obvious. But I understand one thing. In the foreground, there should be a person who will keep the situation under control.

'There will be too many factors that will be able to increase destabilization - from the [tanking] economy to separatist sentiments in the regions.'

This could lead to breakaway attempts by some regions, he said.

'As the federal budget is reduced, subsidies will be reduced, respectively, in the regions...., and they will say: 'Why do we need Moscow?'

Comment – In far-flung Russian Federation states and republics, industry is scarce and hard to initialize or realize, with annual basic funding entirely dependent upon Moscow's pleasure and political largesse. Funding for even basic "Russian" projects is diminishing rapidly in Moscow and the Kremlin because of the war. The (bartering) flow of "human fodder" from these areas to the Kremlin for its "special military operation" is linked to Moscow's benevolence toward them. As will undoubtedly happen, this flow will start to ebb at some stage and so too will their Moscow-sourced revenue. And then all bets are off because without central Moscow funding, leaders of these states and provinces are rendered extremely vulnerable.

Russia's Medvedev floats idea of pushing back Poland's borders - Putin's ally says Russia will be victorious in Ukraine and is ready to fight until the Polish border to counter 'threats.'

The only way for Russia to ensure lasting peace with Ukraine is to push back the borders of hostile states, even as far as the frontiers of NATO member Poland, said former President Dmitry Medvedev.

Medvedev, now deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, made the comments in a message on his Telegram account on Friday, a year after Moscow sent tens of thousands of troops into Ukraine in what it called a "special military operation" to protect Russian speakers and ensure its own security.

"Victory will be achieved. We all want it to happen as soon as possible. And that day will come," said Medvedev. He predicted that tough negotiations with Ukraine and the West would culminate in "some kind of agreement."

But he said that deal would lack "fundamental agreements on real borders" and not amount to an overarching European security pact, making it vital for Russia to extend its borders now.

"That is why it is so important to achieve all the goals of the special military operation. To push back the borders that threaten our country as far as possible, even if they are the borders of Poland," said Medvedev.

Inside 'Zombieland' Russia with 'brainwashed' people cut off and unable to buy key goods - Some Russians dream of a new life in the West, while others wave flags and repeat the daily propaganda broadcast. "The war is making people crazy – welcome to Zombieland," says Nika, 31, from Moscow.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine was supposed to make Russia a superpower again.

The warmonger appeared on Russian television in February, 2022 to announce the beginning of what he called a "special military operation", with the then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson awoken in the middle of the night at 10 Downing Street with a call from one of his advisers.

Instead, it has brought back the dark days of the Soviet Union, as citizens struggle to get hold of basic goods and are cut off from the world behind a curtain of censorship.

Ukraine remains bruised by the devastation, the deaths of tens of thousands of people and the fleeing of millions more.

United Nations head António Guterres condemned Russia's actions as an "affront" to the world's collective conscience at a meeting of the General Assembly nearly one year on.

While for Russian people, some dream of a new life in the West, while others wave flags and repeat the daily propaganda broadcast. "The war is making people crazy – welcome to Zombieland," says Nika, 31, from Moscow.

Propaganda billboards - 'God is with us.'

Billboards have sprung up across the capital and throughout cities across the country.

“History always repeats itself,” one reads, showing pictures of the Soviet Red Army fighting the Nazis in WWII.

Some feature portraits of soldiers on the front lines – “Glory to Russia’s heroes” – calling on locals to sign up.

Others display the pro-war “Z” symbol.

The propaganda now poisons almost every part of life in Russia. Earlier this month, a group of pre-teen girl cheerleaders won a competition with a dance set to a pro-war song that declares “Donbass is ours and God is with us”.

Meanwhile, school pupils aged just eight are being taught to handle AK-47 by teenage girls in red berets.

“The special operation will be over before the end of the year – and the West will kneel,” Chechen warlord and Putin ally Ramzan Kadyrov announced earlier this month.

Despite the promises of victory, things are getting harder back home for Russians.

“The biggest problem is with banks,” says 46-year-old businessman Kolya. “We can’t pay with foreign cards or with our phones, and there isn’t enough cash to go around so you sometimes have to queue to get money.

“And prices in the shops are much higher – food, medicine, clothes and so on have become much more expensive.”

However, he adds, amid the crisis is opportunity. “I own a company that makes products for the Russian market. Because Western brands have left, there’s much less competition.”

Familiar products such as soft drinks have been replaced with locally produced alternatives, including CoolCola.

But locals say iPhones and luxury brands are still on sale in upmarket department stores, despite sanctions.

An isolated country out in the cold.

Isolation isn’t going so well in some industries though, and new cars have stopped rolling off the production line because of shortages of foreign parts.

Even Ladas, a Soviet-era brand billed as the Russian car of the future, has had to limit sales because its factories have run out of paint. It means they can only be bought in black and white.

A senior economist working with Russian clients said: “Russia is now more isolated than it was during the days of the Soviet Union. Restrictions on things like microchips and semiconductors mean industry is grinding to a halt.

“The only reason there hasn’t been a massive collapse is because the economy was already bad for a decade before the invasion, and people have not been living well for a long time.”

Unhappy meal arrives as burger giant pulls out.

Last May, McDonald’s announced it was closing its stores across Russia – three decades after the first fast food restaurant was opened following the fall of the Soviet Union.

Now, just off Red Square where the golden arches once stood, is a garish red and orange brand called Tasty – Full Stop.

It has taken over more than 800 of the American chain’s former locations, selling items like a Double Egg Muffin and the Big Special burger.

A state of fascism

While Russians are used to living under authoritarian governments, many are surprised by how extreme the censorship and repression has become since the start of the invasion of Ukraine.

“Russia has gone through a fascist transition,” says Dr Ian Garner, author of a new book on Russia’s “Z Generation” – young people growing up in an increasingly angry and isolated country.

“Putin has always been drifting in this direction, but in the past year things have fallen off a cliff,” he says.

Article by Gabriel Gavin in the Mirror earlier today.