

Conflict Update # 342

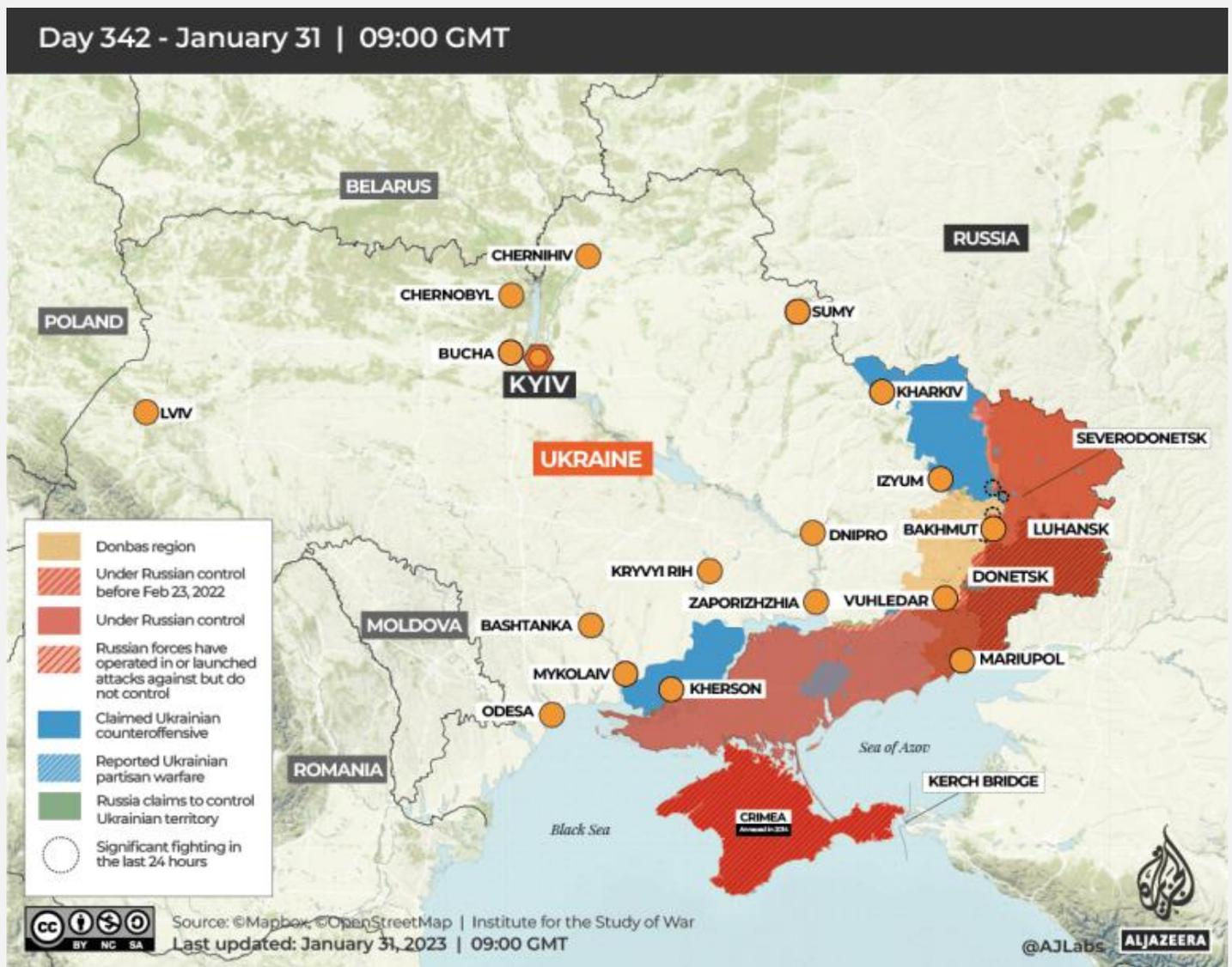
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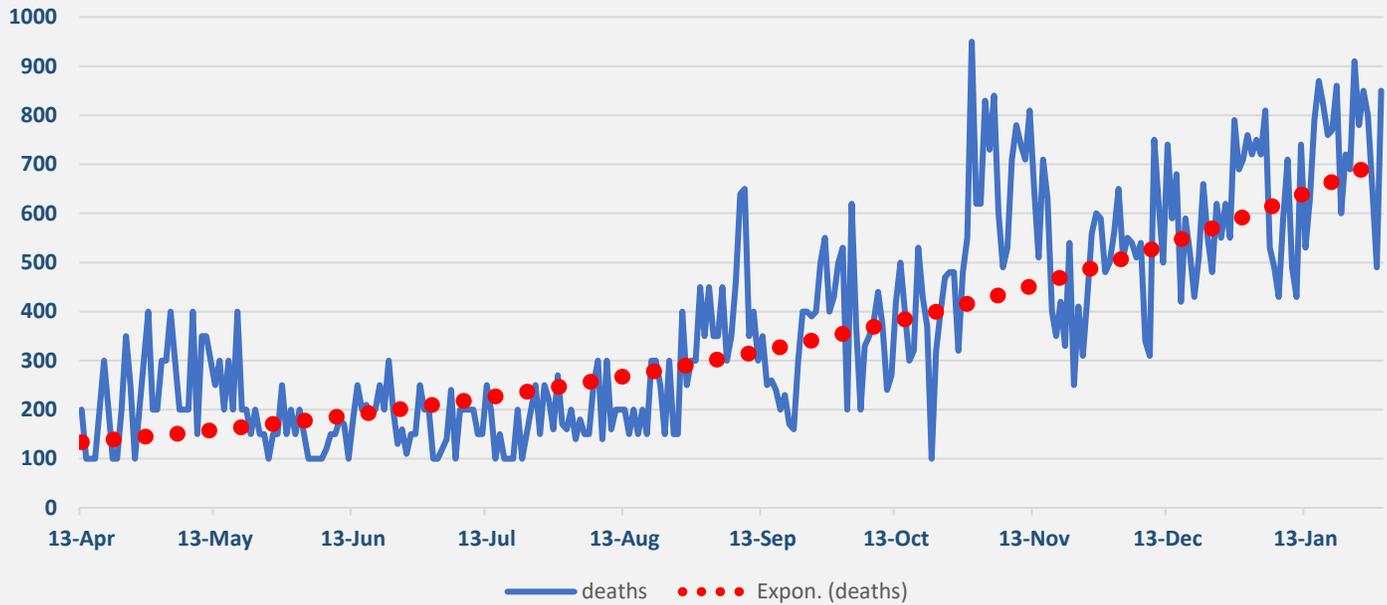
Conflict Assessment

Russian losses¹ – 127,500 (850) soldiers killed, 3,201 (+0) enemy tanks, 6,378 (+9) armored combat vehicles, 2,197 (+1) artillery systems, 454 (+1) MLRS systems, 221 (+0) air defense systems, 293 (+0) warplanes, 284 (+0) helicopters, 1,951 (+4) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 796 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,048 (+7) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 200 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Russian troop deaths by day



Russia's 'big revenge' has begun - President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had warned for weeks that Moscow sought to step up assaults after months of virtual stalemate.

Russia has begun its “big revenge” for Ukraine’s resistance to its invasion, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said, as Russian forces claimed a series of incremental gains in his country’s east.

Zelenskyy has been warning for weeks that Moscow aims to step up its assault on Ukraine after about two months of virtual stalemate along the front line that stretches across the south and east.

While there was no sign of a broader new offensive on Monday, the administrator of Russian-controlled parts of Ukraine’s eastern Donetsk province, Denis Pushilin, said Russian troops had secured a foothold in Vuhledar, a coal mining town whose ruins have been a Ukrainian bastion since the outset of the war.

Pushilin’s adviser, Yan Gagin, said fighters from Russian mercenary force Wagner had taken partial control of a supply road leading to Bakhmut, a city that has been the focus of a Russian offensive for months.

A day earlier, the head of Wagner said his fighters had secured Blahodatne, a village just north of Bakhmut.

Kyiv said it had repelled assaults on Blahodatne and Vuhledar. The Reuters news agency could not independently verify the situations there, but the locations of the reported fighting indicated clear, though gradual, Russian gains.

Zelenskyy said Russian attacks in the east were relentless despite heavy casualties on the Russian side, casting them as payback for Ukraine’s success in pushing Russian forces back from the capital, northeast and south earlier in the conflict.

“Russia really wants its big revenge. I think they have [already] started it,” Zelenskyy said.

Russian missiles have killed three people in the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson, while fighting rages in the eastern Donetsk region where Russia again shelled the key town of Vuhledar, Ukrainian officials said.

Russia has moved additional forces and equipment to its western Kursk region on the border with Ukraine, according to the region's governor.

Amid worries over Russian forces in Belarus, former officer says Belarusian conscripts won't fight - Belarus's armed forces could face widespread desertion from conscripts should the country's strongman leader, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, order an invasion of Ukraine, a former senior law enforcement official said.

The prediction by Alyaksandr Azarov, who represents an association of former Belarusian security officials, comes amid conflicting signals about whether Lukashenka may finally decide to commit Belarusian troops to the Ukraine invasion, now in its 12th month.

In the run-up to last February's invasion, Russia held large-scale military exercises in Belarus. But as the exercises wound down, many of the 30,000 Russian troops stationed there were then used to invade Ukraine, in an unsuccessful push south to seize the Ukrainian capital and topple the government.

But while Lukashenka's government has allowed Russia's military wide leeway to use Belarusian territory, Lukashenka has sidestepped pressure from Moscow to actively join the invasion.

In November, satellite imagery obtained by RFE/RL's Belarus Service showed that thousands of Russian troops may have returned to Belarus, renewing questions about another incursion into Ukraine.

In an interview broadcast on January 29 on Current Time, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with VOA, Azarov, who served as a lieutenant colonel with the Interior Ministry's organized crime unit (known as GUBOPIK), said Lukashenka's intentions are very difficult to understand.

"Today, he says one thing, tomorrow another. But he says what suits him," said Azarov, whose organization, BYPOL, was founded in 2020 in the wake of unprecedented mass protests that erupted when Lukashenka claimed victory in a disputed election. BYPOL stands for Union of Security Forces of Belarus.

"Everyone, including Lukashenka, understands that Ukraine is not going to attack, and will not attack, the territory of Belarus. It seems to me that this is more aimed at the Belarusian audience and the Russian audience" -- at Russian President Vladimir Putin, Azarov said.

"In general, the Belarusian Army partially supports Russia, but the majority [of soldiers], of course, do not," he said. "But no one wants to fight. They hope it doesn't come to that. The Belarusian Army has never been involved in any military actions since gaining independence" from the Soviet Union in 1991.

He said that if Belarussian commanders were to call a general mobilization, the vast majority of conscripts would look to avoid fighting.

"We talked with officers, and they say that if hostilities begin, then 90 percent of conscripts will think about how to desert," Azarov said. "They won't take part in hostilities. At least they will try not to take part."

Still, Azarov said, the groundwork for a possible invasion of Ukraine is under way. The joint exercises being conducted, he said, are of an offensive, not defensive, nature.

"If you take everything that is happening in Belarus, everything is in preparation for invasion. The air force exercises are taking place now. This is also preparation for invasion," he said. "Moreover, Russian aviation is doing [offensive maneuvers], and Belarusian aircraft are playing the role of escort, cover, and protection of Russian aviation."

Belarusian opposition leader Pavel Latushka also warned this month that Belarusian authorities could soon begin a military mobilization. He said employees of domestic security and law enforcement agencies have been forced to turn over their passports, effectively barring them from leaving the country.

The Institute for the Study of War, a U.S.-based think tank, said Russian forces are clearly using Belarusian military infrastructure, including bases, supply chains, and railroads, but that there is no indication that Russian forces are starting to position themselves for offensive operations in Belarus.

Sanctions

Punished by western sanctions, Russia's airlines are showing more cracks and more problems - On January 9, a 4-year-old Airbus A320 operated by the Russian airline S7 was flying from the Siberian city of Bratsk to Moscow when it encountered a problem: Its toilet system malfunctioned. The flight was forced to divert to the city of Kazan for an unscheduled landing.

Four days earlier, a Red Wings airline passenger jet flying from Kazan to Yekaterinburg was forced to turn around and returned to its departure airport after its landing gear failed to retract.

Two months before that, a top transport official in the letter to the ministry for the development of the Far new passenger planes because our current planes year.

The reason, according to the letter The plane's Canadian-built Pratt & repaired due to Western sanctions.

Since the beginning of 2023, seven incidents in which flights canceled, according to Russian media. blamed on human error, most were

Nearly one year after Russia invaded Ukraine regional conflict into the largest land war in are showing in Russian aviation industry.

Russian airlines are struggling under the have all but cut off the already struggling industry from badly needed imported parts.

At least nine Russian airlines stopped flying in 2022, according to the newspaper Kommersant -- four of them after the national aviation regulator, Rosaviatsiya, pulled their airworthiness certificates.

Experts say Russian airlines have for months turned to "cannibalization" to maintain and perform upkeep on their fleets, which range from small Canadian DHC-6 turboprops used by the Far Eastern regional carrier Aurora to the flagship national carrier Aeroflot, which flies Boeings and Airbuses, as well as Russian-built Tupolevs and Irkuts.

In November, the Telegram channel Baza reported that Aeroflot had cannibalized 25 planes for parts, and another 18 aircraft were under maintenance and awaiting repairs. In December, the Russian government finally legalized the practice of cannibalization.



Pacific coast region of Primorye sent a East and Arctic in Moscow: We need won't be able to fly anymore after this

obtained by the news outlet RBK? Whitney engines couldn't be

Russian airlines have reported at least were disrupted, delayed, or While a couple incidents were mechanical in nature.

last February, turning a simmering Europe since World War II, cracks

weight of Western sanctions that

U.S. curbs exports to Iranian firms for producing drones - The United States has placed new trade restrictions on seven Iranian entities for producing drones used by Russia to attack Ukraine, the U.S. Department of Commerce said. The firms and other organizations were added to an export control list for those engaged in activities contrary to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests. The additions to the so-called entities list were posted in a preliminary filing on January 31. Since Moscow launched its unprovoked war against Ukraine, the United States and other countries have sought to degrade Russia's military and defense industrial base by using export controls to restrict its access to technology.

IOC Says sporting sanctions on Russia 'not negotiable' - The International Olympic Committee (IOC) insisted on January 31 that the sporting sanctions on Russia and Belarus, imposed over the invasion of Ukraine, are not negotiable. These include bans on Russian and Belarusian athletes competing under their countries' flag. The head of Russia's Olympic Committee, Stanislav Pozdnyakov, had said earlier that athletes representing Russia must not be subjected to different conditions than those of other countries, amid a growing row over their possible participation in the Paris 2024 Olympics. "The sanctions against the Russian and Belarusian state and governments are not negotiable," an IOC spokesperson said. "They have been unanimously confirmed by the recent Olympic summit meeting on December 9."

Russia faces new sanctions on its energy exports - but this time China and India may not come to Putin's rescue - Russia faces new sanctions on its energy exports, but this time China and India may not come to President Vladimir Putin's rescue.

The EU will ban imports of refined Russian fuels on February 5, adding to its embargo on seaborne Russian crude oil that began in December.

But while China and India eagerly snapped up discounted supplies of Russian crude that Europe shunned, they are unlikely to buy refined Russian fuels that were once sold to the EU.

"Both are net exporters of products, so there's no need for them to be importing more," Viktor Katona, lead crude analyst at Kpler, told Insider.

Russian fuels could instead find buyers in Singapore and Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates, then head to larger Asian markets from there, but not the big ones, he added.

Russian products could also flow to West Africa and Latin America, while Europe will likely start sourcing more of its diesel from the US and Asia in a "round of musical chairs," Katona said.

China and India produce fuels at their own refineries that could also supply Europe. In fact, a Chinese cargo is already headed to Latvia, according to the Financial Times, despite the extra time and cost of shipping across such distances.

In addition, a ban on Russian fuels could give both China and India more room to bargain for any supplies they do end up buying, according to Morningstar energy and utilities strategist Stephen Ellis.

Looming over the fuel market is a price cap on Russian fuels. Similar to the oil price cap, the EU and G7 plan to bar other countries from accessing insurance and shipping services unless they abide by a cap on refined products.

EU officials are considering a cap of \$100 per barrel for Russian diesel and a cap of \$45 a barrel for Russian fuel oil, sources told Bloomberg.

Comments, Developments & Reports

Putin's war in Ukraine pushes ex-Soviet states toward new allies - Putin invaded Ukraine partly to assert his country's regional dominance once and for all. Nearly a year on, Putin has achieved the opposite — and not just in Kyiv.

Officials from ex-Soviet states in central Asia and the Caucasus say the war has prompted their governments to look for ways to reduce dependence on Moscow by turning to rival powers including Turkey, the European Union and Middle East countries. All spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid antagonizing the Kremlin.

Current and former Russian officials, also speaking on condition they are not identified, said Moscow is reacting nervously, even harshly, as the Kremlin becomes less certain of its ability to assert influence in its own backyard.

Russia has been for decades “a veto player, a gatekeeper in northern Eurasia where nothing much could happen if the Kremlin didn’t like it,” said Ekaterina Schulmann, a Russian political scientist now based in Berlin. “Now that seems to be changing” with Russia unlikely to emerge stronger from the war in Ukraine, and “this makes dictating one’s will to neighbors problematic, to say the least.”

While the failure of a key Kremlin war aim is clearest in Ukraine and Moldova, which applied for EU membership and gained candidate status after the conflict erupted, the invasion has forced even traditional friends such as Kazakhstan and Armenia to actively build ties with powers that Moscow long sought to keep at bay in the region. That has allowed Turkey in particular to step in to the void.

Announcing his Feb. 24 invasion, Putin at the time cited Kazakhstan as a model for the kind of relationship he wanted Russia to have with ex-Soviet states. He’d sent troops to help President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev crush deadly riots only the previous month.

Yet Tokayev has since disagreed openly with Putin’s justification for the war, while allowing hundreds of thousands of Russians to flee to central Asia’s largest oil exporter after Russia announced mobilization in September. Schulmann, who was designated a “foreign agent” by the Kremlin days after she left Russia in April, was welcomed in Kazakhstan this month by the head of its Senate, the country’s second-highest official, and offered a professorship at one of its universities.

“Russia is becoming more and more toxic,” said Beibit Apsenbetov, a former board member of Kazakhstan’s largest bank, Kazkommertsbank JSC. “What to do when your neighbor is a drunkard and rowdy, and you can’t move out?”

Putin & Russia

Russia shifting war focus to 'NATO and the West,' says EU official - A senior EU official says Russia has taken its war against Ukraine to "a different stage" through indiscriminate attacks on civilians and nonmilitary targets, while criticizing Moscow for triggering recent moves by Germany and the United States to send advanced tanks to Ukraine. Stefano Sannino, secretary-general of the European Union’s European External Action Service, told reporters in Tokyo that Putin had "moved from a concept of special operation to a concept now of a war against NATO and the West." He said German and U.S. tank provisions are meant to help Ukrainians defend themselves rather than making them attackers.

'Russia is on the verge of direct collision with US and NATO' and it is 'very possible' there will be no arms control treaty with America after 2026, Moscow warns - Russia yesterday warned it is on the 'verge of a direct collision with the US and NATO' and it is 'very possible' there will be no nuclear arms control treaty with America after 2026 due to Washington's efforts to inflict 'strategic defeat' on Moscow in Ukraine.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Washington's decision to supply Kyiv with 31 of its fast-moving M1 Abrams tanks was an 'extremely destructive step' which 'escalated' the war in Ukraine.

Ryabkov claimed Washington's apparent insistence to inflict 'strategic defeat' on Russia means that the future of the nuclear arms control treaty between the US and Moscow is in doubt.

The militarization of Russia's economy, and the demise of the oligarchs - By putting the economy on a war footing, Putin risks returning Russia to the days of Stalinist totalitarianism, where there will be no oligarchs or businesses left, only loyal administrators.

The war with Ukraine has not gone according to Vladimir Putin's plan. Eleven months have passed, but less than 17% of Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, is under Russian control.

Moreover, the war has been much longer and more expensive than Putin expected: Russia is under international sanctions, oil prices are frozen and oligarchs are trying to withdraw whatever shreds of their money they can from the country.

Under these conditions, the Russian president has been forced to roll back social support and squeeze everything out of the economy for the war budget. Russian economic observer Boris Grozovsky tells Vazhnyye Istorii what Putin's policies will mean for Russia.

Putin has enough money for the long war, but it's becoming harder and harder to get. Sanctions against Russian exports are beginning to have an effect, and oil and gas revenues have fallen. The federal budget will receive less money, and the economy will shrink: the government predicts a 0.8% drop in GDP this year, but experts predict a threefold decline.

Accounting for inflation, oil and gas exports will likely be 20-34% less than they were in the second half of the 2010s, predicts CMAPC, a think tank connected to the Russian government. With this decline in revenue, the budget and the entire economy will have to adjust to a much poorer and simpler life.

It is impossible to calculate the exact cost of the war: the statistics are now classified, and some military expenditures are disguised as civilians — described as pensions, industry, etc. — and the share of classified budget expenditures has grown from 16% in 2021 to 22.4% in 2023.

But from what is disclosed, it is clear that spending on military and security increased from 24% to 32% of the budget, an unprecedented amount.

This soaring spending means cuts to civilian expenditures, and squeezing more money out of the economy. For example, increases in social spending will barely cover inflation, even though a third of the population depends on government aid.

But cutting spending alone won't be enough. Russian oligarchs worry that the logic of war will lead the government to nationalize or transfer businesses from less loyal owners to more loyal ones, as happened with Yandex and Tinkoff. Some big companies are reported to have commissioned studies by historians on how the Nazi and fascist Italian regimes dealt with large private property.

The most radical, like Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, have already proposed confiscating the property of Russians who moved abroad and "publicly slung mud at Russia."

Russian officials are bound to come to the same conclusion that the government should take control of businesses whose owners don't vigorously support the war.

Revenue mobilization has already begun. Last year, the government added Gazprom's profits to the budget, and in December, it looked at increasing dividend payments to state companies and making a one-time payment to the budget for coal and fertilizer producers.

Members of the Russian elite know that this will end badly. The war has already cut off Russian business from world markets, and the billionaires from their foreign wealth and property. The next step is the regulation of profits.

A wartime economy is characterized by central planning and mobilization — otherwise, it is impossible to make businesses and people work for the war. During WWII, Britain and the US had to switch to centralized planning and distribution of goods needed for the front and investments. Russia's mobilization approach is even more peculiar.

In the late 1920s, Stalin accelerated mobilization planning, making it the center of preparations for a future war, believing that the entirety of the country's human and material resources were needed to ensure military success. Stalinist militarism required a forced transformation of economic and social structures toward militarization — similar to what Russia is experiencing now.

Since Stalin, wars have become much more technologically advanced. The Americans did not need to mobilize for the war in Iraq. Putin thought the war in Ukraine would be similar and did not plan to radically change the socioeconomic system. But now, that is becoming a necessity, as long as the Russian government cannot admit defeat by withdrawing from Ukrainian territory.

Despite the clearly failed preparations for February 2022, all that Russia needs is a redoubled effort to finally "press the enemy" — this is more or less how Russian military commentators reason.

In the mid-1930s, the Soviet army was considered the strongest in the world. Then, it suffered humiliating defeats, losses in the millions, and, finally, victory — but at the cost of unimaginable casualties and with the help of allies. Putin, who likes to compare himself to Peter the Great, does not mind repeating Stalin's successes on occasion.

Both Russian military leaders and business people remember this history. So they are soberly aware that a continuing war, which will require a significant increase in arms production, would not leave their business empires untouched.

Direct nationalization won't be necessary — price regulation, scheduled deliveries of goods needed for the army, as well as high taxes or profit-taking, which have already begun, will suffice. Businesses will collapse or move to the hands of managers loyal to the state as a result.

The economy will not come to this immediately. So far, the state buys products from businesses at market prices — but the logic of wartime and government action will almost inevitably lead to an economy geared toward war. First, the limitation of profits (it is unpatriotic to make much money from military orders), then of prices (everything for the front, everything for victory). Welcome to the mobilization economy.

The first prisoners recruited by Wagner to fight in Ukraine are returning to civilian life as free men - Their story has not been featured on television, only on a handful of regional media and websites in exile. Their tale recounts the return to civilian life in Russia of these rather unusual "heroes" — former prisoners recruited by the Wagner mercenary group and now released following their service in Ukraine.

Take Alexander Tyutin, for instance. This entrepreneur from Saint Petersburg was arrested in 2018, while plotting for his niece's murder. During the investigation, it appeared he already ordered the murders of a business partner and the man's wife and two children, ages 11 and 15, all killed with an axe. Sentenced in 2021 to 23 years in prison, he left his penal colony in the Karelia region, in July 2022, to join Wagner. Now he is back in Saint Petersburg, living as a free man.

Stanislav Bogdanov punched a judge to death using his fist and a dumbbell. Sentenced to 23 years in prison, he was released after 10. Telling his story to independent media (in exile) Holod, he said that he'd lost a leg but won a medal, giving lessons of patriotism while at it. There's also Kirill Neglin, convicted of drug trafficking and of beating his wife. In court, he swore he would kill her as soon as he got out of prison. He too is free.

Murderers, burglars, members of criminal organizations... They all have one thing in common: They have completed six months of service within the Wagner group. A pillar of the "special operation" in Ukraine, the group boasts forces

numbering in the tens of thousands. Among the first of its recruits, these men have been gradually leaving Ukraine, pocketing a monthly stipend of ₪200,000 (€2,660).

'Secret Ukazy'

Throughout his prison recruitment tours, Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin has been fond of saying, "Only three people can get you out of this: Allah, God or me. I just can't guarantee that you will be alive." In reality, Russian President Vladimir Putin alone retains the authority to pardon a convicted prisoner. On Friday, January 27, the Kremlin spokesman confirmed the existence of "secret ukazy ('orders') of amnesty by the Russian leader.

Prigozhin is unusually discreet about the matter. The newly opened Wagner Center in Saint Petersburg did not respond to Le Monde on this point, nor on the total number of prisoners released. On the other hand, these returns from the front – four or five groups since January 5 – have generated considerable publicity, at least in the media controlled by the businessman.

On January 18, he addressed a group of some 25 men. "For the time being, you're going home. If you want to come back to the war, you don't need to go through prison... You have money and you have medals, so be careful. Those who want to come back, we will see you there. To those who want to get married, study or get baptized, you have my blessing." The fighters expressed thanks, exchanged manly hugs and boarded a bus.

Diplomacy

Ukraine's president says he met with Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen in the southern Ukrainian region of Mykolaiv and discussed the effect of Russian missile and drone strikes with regional officials.

Finland's foreign minister says it is maintaining its plan to join NATO at the same time as Nordic neighbour Sweden despite a potential Turkish block on the latter's bid.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has urged South Korea to increase military support to Ukraine, citing other countries have changed their policy of not providing weapons to countries in conflict following Russia's invasion.

The Kremlin has accused Boris Johnson of lying after the former British PM said Putin had threatened the United Kingdom with a missile attack during a phone call in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine.

Iran has summoned Ukraine's charge d'affaires in Tehran over comments by a Ukrainian official on a drone attack on a military factory in the central Iranian province of Isfahan, according to the semiofficial Tasnim news agency.

Senior Chinese diplomat Wang Yi is set to visit Moscow in February, Russia's Vedomosti newspaper says, citing two sources.

Containment

British tank training for Ukrainian troops has begun - Ukrainian troops will begin training in the United Kingdom to use the country's Challenger 2, following the British government's pledge to send a squadron of the tanks to Ukraine.

Biden to speak with Zelenskiy as Ukraine's calls for fighter jets grow louder - Biden says he will speak with Zelenskiy about Ukraine's latest request for sophisticated weapons a day after saying no to sending F-16 fighter jets.

Kyiv has been pressing harder for the advanced jets since winning a pledge from Western allies last week for tanks. The United States and its European allies have so far refused to send fighter jets and other weapons that could be used to attack deep inside Russia.

Biden responded negatively when asked by reporters on January 30 if Washington would send F-16s. He told reporters on January 31 that he and Zelenskiy were "going to talk" but gave no further details.

French President Emmanuel Macron, who was to meet with Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov in Paris on January 31, sent a mixed message, telling reporters on January 30 that "nothing is excluded" when it comes to military assistance.

But Macron, speaking in The Hague, said conditions would have to be met before fighter jets would be sent.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki also did not rule out a possible supply of F-16s to Ukraine in comments he made on January 30. But on January 31, Polish Deputy Defense Minister Wojciech Skurkiewicz told the AFP news agency that Poland currently is not having "official discussions" on transferring any of its own F-16s to Ukraine.

Lithuanian president urges west to 'cross red lines,' consider sending fighter jets to Ukraine - Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda has urged the West to keep all options open to requests from Ukraine for weaponry, including fighter jets. Nausėda said in an interview with Lithuanian television on January 31 that fighter aircraft and long-range missiles were "essential military aid" and "at this crucial stage in the war, where the turning point is about to happen." "These red lines must be crossed," he added. The United States and Germany have so far ruled out such demands from Kyiv, though France says it is not against it in principle.

President Emmanuel Macron has said France does not exclude sending fighter jets to Ukraine, provided such equipment will not be used "to touch Russian soil" or "weaken the capacities of the French army".

Norway will send part of its fleet of German-made Leopard 2 battle tanks to Ukraine "as soon as possible", perhaps by late March, its defence minister said.

Croatia's president has criticized Western nations for supplying Ukraine with heavy tanks and other weapons, saying such arms deliveries will only prolong the war.

France and Australia have agreed to cooperate to manufacture "several thousand" 155mm shells to help Ukraine.

Tanks provided by the United Kingdom to Ukraine will be on the front line before summer, defence minister Ben Wallace said.

Ukraine's military will spend nearly \$550m on drones this year, and 16 supply deals have already been signed with Ukrainian manufacturers, the defence minister said.

Russia's deputy foreign minister says it is "quite possible" the New START nuclear arms control treaty with the United States would end after 2026.

NATO, Japan pledge to strengthen ties in face of 'historic' security threat - NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida have pledged to strengthen ties, saying Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its growing military cooperation with China had created the most tense security environment since World War II. The comments came in a statement issued during Stoltenberg's trip to Japan following a visit to South Korea on which he urged Seoul to increase military support to Ukraine and gave similar warnings. "The world is at a historical inflection point in the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II," the two leaders said in the statement.