

Conflict Update Day 388

March 18th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 164,200 (+880) soldiers killed, 3,511 (+5) enemy tanks, 6,830 (+7) armored combat vehicles, 2,560 (+8) artillery systems, 506 (2) MLRS systems, 265 (+0) air defense systems, 305 (+0) warplanes, 290 (+0) helicopters, 2,159 (+14) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 907 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,404 (+3) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 259 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Russia is sustaining up to 1,500 casualties a day in its current offensive, mostly in the eastern city of Bakhmut, according to a senior Nato official. Ukraine was taking “an order of magnitude less” in fighting where “several thousand” shells a day have been fired by both sides, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Russian leaders facing difficult choice due to 'depleted' forces: UK - Russian commanders will likely have to make tough choices between pushing forward in eastern Ukraine and maintaining a "credible defense" of its front line, according to a new intelligence assessment.

Russian forces on the battlefield have "temporarily" drained their "combat power." This means they cannot launch widespread offensives, the British MoD said yesterday.

Writing on Twitter, the government department said Russian leaders will push to replace personnel and munition stocks to be able to restart offensives on the front line.

Chinese President Xi Jinping will travel to Russia next week for a state visit after an invitation from Putin.

Comment – Something is diplomatically afoot, which I believe to be Russia hitting its culmination point as explained in yesterday's Update. There is a flurry of diplomatic scurrying to and fro between the four primary protagonists in Russia's invasion of Ukraine – Russia, China, Belarus and Iran. Lukashenko has been to Moscow, Tehran and Beijing, Raisi to Moscow, Russian FM Lavrov to Beijing and Tehran, Putin to Minsk and last but certainly not least, Xi now heading to Moscow this coming Monday. Throw into this, Syria's al Assad visit to Moscow earlier this week and one must wonder what is under discussion in these Capitals?

Perhaps Moscow has signalled the end is nigh and there is a backstop movement of support being implemented, backstop because if it was an existing plan, it would have merely swung into action, and not be the subject of such intense attention.

Is Xi "biting the bullet," in providing lethal aid to Moscow? given its bi-polar world order partner under dire threat, or preparing to route aid via Syria into Russian military storage points in that country?, or via Iran and into Iranian shipments to the Kremlin?, or perhaps has Lukashenko offered – or been coerced – into bringing in weapons under the guise of an expanded Belarusian/Chinese trade deal?

We will keep monitoring.

Ukraine Moving? – There were blogger reports last night of Ukrainian movement into Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts along multiple fronts. We await further confirmation hereof.

Ukrainian forces in the east of the country continue to withstand Russian assaults on the now-destroyed city of Bakhmut, which has become Europe's bloodiest infantry battle since World War II. Russian forces have captured the city's eastern part but have so far failed to encircle Bakhmut and cut off Ukrainian troop supply lines.

UGS said Russia carried out 19 air attacks and 26 rocket attacks against Bakhmut yesterday. Russian forces also conducted four air strikes on the front-line town of Avdiivka south of Bakhmut, the army said.

The US has resumed surveillance drone flights over the Black Sea region just days after Russian fighter jets intercepted a US Reaper surveillance drone and engaged in actions that Washington said caused the uncrewed aircraft to crash. (**Comment** – Some time ago we reported on British Intelligence aircraft flying over and around the Black Sea, including along the Crimean coastline, reportedly collecting troop information of Russian assembly and supply chain points. It was alleged that this information was being passed into a central Intelligence "pot" for Ukrainian use in targeting enemy positions and posts).

Ukraine fights off 'massive' Russian attacks in Bakhmut with WWI-era machine guns and sniper traps -

Ukraine has used a WWI-era machine gun on the front line to mow down the enemy. "It only works when there is a massive attack going on," a Ukrainian soldier told BBC News. Ukrainian forces have used Maxim machine guns (pictured right), a weapon often associated with World War I, to mow down frontal assaults by Russian troops in the battle for Bakhmut.

"It only works when there is a massive attack going on," a Ukrainian soldier identified as Borys, 48, recently told BBC News of the Maxim gun. "Then it really works."



"We use it every week," Borys added.

Ukrainian forces have found the Maxim M1910 — was first introduced in 1910 (the initial version of the gun emerged in the 1880s) and employed by the Imperial Russian Army during World War I — useful in the fight against the Russians. Ukraine's troops have modified the guns with modern add-ons such as optics and suppressors, according to reporting from Task and Purpose.

Ukraine has also apparently utilized a type of World War I-era sniper decoy, employing dummies meant to fool enemy snipers. They prop dummies up out of trenches, attracting Russian sniper fire, identifying the sniper location and then taking them out.

This is the opposite of what Russian troops do, where they take untrained soldiers and prisoners signed up for combat, push them to the front and watch for Ukrainian fire killing them. Should these "human dummies" turn around, they are shot for desertion.

Russians try to surround Avdiivka, lose nearly two companies of soldiers - Russian forces yesterday attempted to encircle Avdiivka in order to localize all of Ukraine's defence forces in this area but in the process they lost almost two companies of military personnel, said Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi, the Head of the United Press Center of the Defence Forces of the Tavriia front.

Russia losing troops so fast, they may 'collapse' by year's end: ex-General - Ben Hodges, retired U.S. Army officer who served as commanding general in the United States Army Europe, predicted Russian forces might "collapse" before the end of the year, succumbing to the battle of attrition in Ukraine.

"Russia is being attrited [*sic*] at such a rate that they may collapse before the end of this year, assuming the West delivers in time what we've promised. War is a test of will and a test of logistics," Hodges tweeted in reference to an assessment by military expert Marcus M. Keupp, who leads the Department of Defense Economics at the Military Academy of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology.

Keupp said in a recent interview with German news outlet t-Online that Ukrainian forces would soon have leverage in the war as the West continues to supply them with military aid and Russia loses more of its troops.

Putin's forces 'guaranteed to lose' Ukraine war: former Russian commander - Former Russian commander Strelkov Igor Ivanovich, also known as Igor Girkin, yesterday listed 12 points on how Russian forces are "guaranteed" to lose their war in Ukraine.

"The discrediting of hostilities in the eyes of the broad masses of the population and the demoralization of the Armed Forces fighting and suffering losses for no reason will be achieved as soon as possible," Girkin wrote as part of several posts on his Telegram channel titled "12 points how we guaranteed to lose the war."

Girkin has been a vocal critic of Putin's war in Ukraine and has long condemned Russian troops' performance since the invasion began in February 2022.

Russia may be preparing for 'forced evacuation' of Crimea - Russian forces in the annexed Crimean peninsula could be "preparing for a possible so-called forced evacuation," according to Ukrainian media.

Russian officials "visited houses and inquired about residents" in Crimea, including whether households had children or elderly members, Ukrainian outlet Channel 24 reported, citing Eskender Bariiev, from the Crimean Tatar Resource Center non-governmental organization.

The collection of this information means Russian forces "are probably preparing for a possible so-called forced evacuation," Bariiev said, in a paraphrased readout by Ukrainian outlet Ukrinform.

Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

Secret Russian document outlines plan for destabilizing Ukraine neighbor - A secret plan drawn up by Russia's security service, the FSB, lays out detailed options to destabilize Moldova -- including supporting pro-Russian groups, utilizing the Orthodox Church and threatening to cut off supplies of natural gas.

Putin deploys nuclear armed warships - Warships in the Russian navy's Northern Fleet have been deployed with tactical nuclear weapons, the Norwegian Intelligence Service said in a report.

The intelligence agency noted the presence of the weapons on the vessels in its annual report. It is believed that this is the first time in 30 years the fleet has gone to sea with the nuclear weapons on board. "A central part of the nuclear capabilities is located on the North Fleet's submarines and surface vessels," the report said.

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, White House National Security adviser Jake Sullivan and Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley spoke of their "unwavering support" for Ukraine during a call with their Ukrainian counterparts on Friday.

The United Nations said it was "doing everything possible" to make sure a deal with Russia allowing the export of Ukrainian grain from Black Sea ports continues.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said its executive board authorized rule changes that would allow the IMF to approve new loan programs for countries that face "exceptionally high uncertainty," which is expected to pave the way for a new Ukraine loan programme.

Turkey's parliament will start ratifying Finland's accession to NATO, though it has held off on approving Sweden's bid to join the defence bloc. Finland and Sweden's applications for NATO membership were prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg hailed Turkey's decision on Friday and said he was confident Sweden would join soon, too.

Containment

What is 'deep sensing' and why is the US Army so focused on it? - The Army is seeking ways to identify, monitor, target and strike opponents from farther distances and with greater precision amid the US military's pivot to the Indo-Pacific.

To do so, the service is pursuing what officials, including Secretary Wormuth and Gen. McConville, dub "deep sensing."

Key to the effort is a "family" of in-development situational awareness tools, Wormuth said this week at the McAleese and Associates defense conference in Washington, D.C. They include the Terrestrial Layer Systems, or TLS, that can provide soldiers with cyber and electronic warfare assistance; the High Accuracy Detection and Exploitation System, or HADES, an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance jet outfitted with advanced sensors; and Tactical Intelligence Targeting Access Node, or TITAN, meant to centralize and accelerate the collection, parsing and distribution of data.

"The first operational imperative for the Army of 2030 is really to be able to see and sense farther and more persistently, at every level across the battlefield, than our enemies," Wormuth said. "So how are we going to do that? We've got to be able to collect and analyze unprecedented quantities of raw data from many different sources."

Comment – As contained in a previous Update, lessons are being learnt from Ukrainian resistance and mobility tactics from remote Intelligence coordination to "shoot and scoot" as well as electric motorcycle "gangs" hitting and running around advancing Russian BTGs, bringing them to a halt in "killing zones."

Putin & Russia

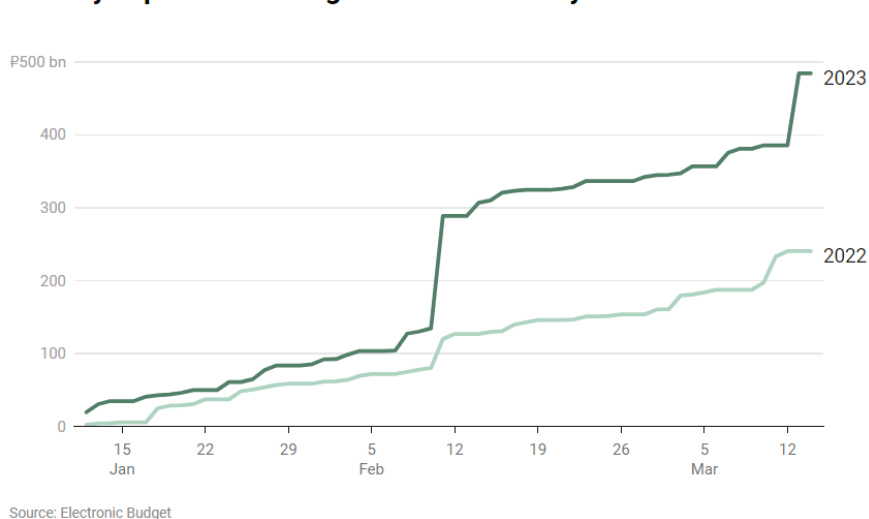
Russia's military expenditures doubled so far in 2023. What was this money spent on? - Russia's national defence spending grew twofold from 1 January to 14 March 2023 compared to the same period last year, as per data published on the governmental Electronic Budget portal studied by Novaya-Europe. This covers only the part of the federal budget made public. The growth of military spending was one of the major factors leading to a record-breaking budget deficit at the beginning of 2023. Novaya-Europe explains what the money was spent on and what will happen to the budget next.

Public expenditures of the federal budget on national defence amounted to 484.4 billion rubles (€5.8 billion) during the period from 1 January to 14 March 2023, which is twice as much as in the same period last year. Furthermore, the plan was to increase the spending under this article only by 6.4% in 2023 — up to 4.9 trillion rubles (€58.8 billion).

The actual expenses are significantly higher than open data suggests. For comparison: in 2022, national defence expenditure amounted to 4.6 trillion rubles (€55.2 billion), with the public part making up only 1.7 trillion rubles (€20.4 billion), or 37%. According to Russian newspaper Vedomosti, in total, 23% of the federal budget spending was classified in 2023, which broke the record held by 2015 when 21% had been classified.

Expenditures in other spheres also increased, although not as significantly.

Military expenditure has grown twofold this year



The Ministry of Internal Affairs, Russia's National Guard, the Ministry of Emergency Services, and special services are all financed under the "National Defence" article. The corresponding expenditures have reached 279 billion rubles (€3.35 billion), which is 18.2% higher compared to the same period last year. Furthermore, back in 2022, national defence spending was increased by 58% — up to 4.4 trillion rubles (€52.8 billion). The major part of the increase applies to the classified parts of the expenditures. It was planned to go up by 59%.

The increase of expenditures at the beginning of the year can be connected to the new format of state contract financing, which was approved by the government last spring, economist Alexandra Suslina-Osmolovskaya tells Novaya-Europe. Back then, the maximum amount for an upfront payment was increased from 30% to 90%. Contracts with an upfront payment over 50% no longer get treasury support, which can delay transfer of money to a supplier.

"Before, it went like this: an application comes into the treasury, it's considered, then the money arrives. Now, there is an upfront payment for those whose request was approved. Thus, the money is allocated before it comes into the budget. I suspect that the government is certain that they will receive the money, so for now, they're allocating money from the sources at their disposal. And theoretically, the spending pace should decrease with time," she explains.

According to the ministry, this will lead to a more equal cash execution of expenses during the entire year whereas previously the bulk of expenditures was usually allocated during the last months of the year.

This scheme is needed so that financing of proprietary expenses is conducted expeditiously, the expert thinks. Representatives of civic sectors, seeing the increase of military expenditures, could have also requested upfront

payments, fearing no money would be left for them. This practice increases the possibility of corruption. “When the money is paid upfront, it’s way more difficult to track it and way easier to embezzle locally,” the economist explains.

The main budget intrigue this year is whether the Finance Ministry will be able to seize enough money from oil companies, using the new calculation formula on Urals’ taxable price. This will become clear in the summer, when the transition to the new formula is completed.

Article from Novaya Gazeta earlier this morning.

International court issues war crimes warrant for Putin - The ICC arrest warrant obligates the court’s 123 member states to arrest Putin and transfer him to The Hague for trial if he sets foot on their territory.

War ruins everything. Demographer - about the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine - The war in Ukraine will lead to serious demographic problems for Russia. Russian authorities do not disclose data on military losses, but, according to experts, they number in the many thousands of people. After the invasion of Ukraine and the subsequently announced mobilization, hundreds of thousands of people left Russia, not wanting to fight and not supporting the policies of Putin. Nobody knows the exact number.

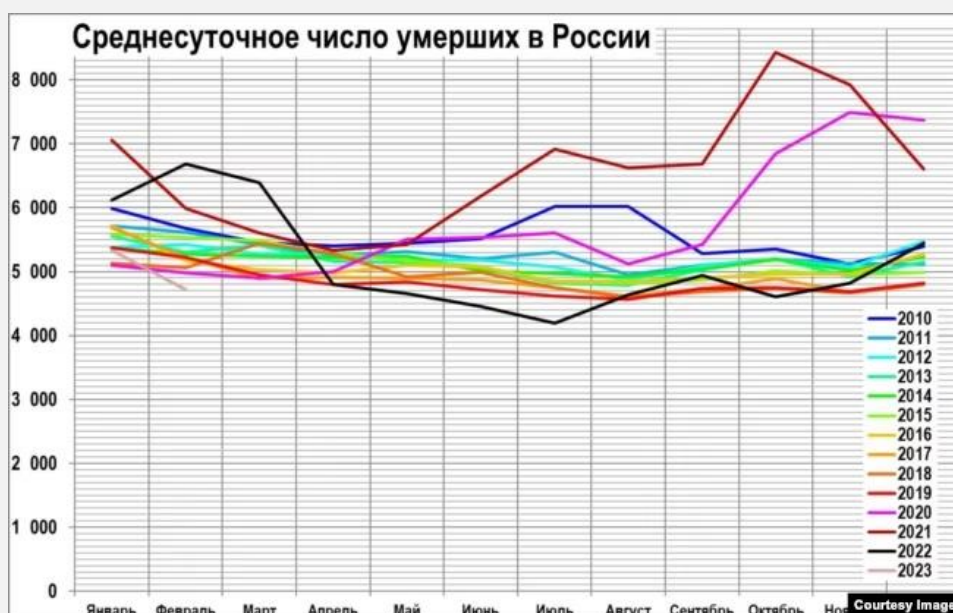
Independent demographer Aleksey Raksha is convinced Russia's military losses in Ukraine are unlikely to fall into the official death statistics. He notes that the number of Russians who died in February is a record low for many decades, and life expectancy for the current year by the end of March will exceed the pre-Covid peak and average of 73.5 years.

According to the demographer, in 2023, 5-10% fewer children will be born in the Russian Federation than a year earlier. But so far it is difficult to associate with the war and the mass exodus of men from the country, the scientist believes.

Raksha is an independent expert and demographer who graduated from the Faculty of Banking with a degree in Finance and Credit of the Financial Academy under the Government of the Russian Federation.

He received his second higher education at the Institute of Demography of the Higher School of Economics with a degree in Demography.

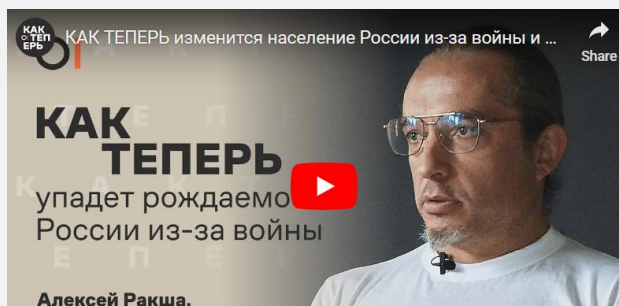
From 2014 to 2020, he worked at the Department of Population and Health Statistics of Rosstat.



Three years ago, in 2020, he was fired from Rosstat because he questioned the veracity of the official statistics on morbidity and mortality in Russia from coronavirus.

It was he who first drew attention to the information that in April 2020, Moscow’s death rate increased by 20% compared to the average data for the previous ten years. He also acted as an expert in studies of coronavirus mortality statistics published on Mediazone and Meduza.

“You can say that I am now a freelance artist, I work for myself. I



sometimes carry out some orders, I advise. I am doing what I love - demography. I did not leave Russia. It is possible to study the demographic situation in Russia without working at Rosstat. First, Rosstat does not publish a very large part of official statistics. Secondly, fellow demographers regularly receive sufficiently detailed and voluminous statistics upon request. Believe that it then has something to work on and something to study. But, of course, there are some more subtle, cunning, experimental calculations and indicators, some secret data that I do not receive.”

“Since military losses are growing, then, in theory, this should somehow affect mortality, but we do not seem to see this. It can be concluded that these statistics cannot be trusted only in terms of military losses. But in terms of civilian deaths, I think they can be trusted. You can trust the number of births, the number of marriages and divorces: it was on this that the famous study of "Mediazona" with calculations of the number of mobilized was based. Unfortunately, after the completely failed census, all coefficients, all relative indicators, such as the birth rate, death rate, life expectancy, now correspond to reality even less than before, and many of them have become completely useless.

“So far, it is rather economic damage - we still do not see significant demographic damage. And we don't have any exact data. First of all, we do not have data on migration, and never will. We can only estimate, try to estimate its scale. But we do not have official and accurate data on migration, and this is a problem. We do not know exactly how many people left us because of the war, how many came because of the war, with this there is even less certainty. But, apparently, these flows plus or minus are more or less equal. So far, the war has had almost no effect on the birth rate. Well, mortality should be studied according to the reports of "Mediazona", multiplied by two. This is all. Therefore, we can say that the war has practically not yet had any effect on the demographics in Russia.”

“In early March, there was a widely discussed article in The Economist, which claimed that over the past three years, Russia has lost at least two million more people than expected – this publication sucked these figures out of its finger, pulled an owl on the globe, shoved the unpushable into the article [*sic*], glued the unglued, seasoned it with some slang words and expressions and thus simply demonstrated the standard of the "yellow press", unfortunately. The article is biased. Journalists could not and did not want to understand the situation. I think it happened because there is a war going on. There is propaganda on both sides. War in general has a bad effect on everything - and on democracy all over the world, and on the press, and on human rights, and on mortality, and on the birth rate. War spoils everything.”

Comment – Given his continued presence in Russia, and knowing the Kremlin tolerates only opinions favoring their propaganda and news slant, we need to view his article with due circumspection.

Aleksey Raksha article in  Сибирь.Реалии earlier today.

Sanctions

Russian business asks Kazakhstan to help to circumvent sanctions - In recent weeks, Russian companies have been more actively asking their Kazakh partners to help them bypass Western sanctions and import necessary goods. This was reported by Reuters, citing seven sources.

Two interlocutors of the agency attribute the increased interest to reports of Ankara's recently-announced plans to stop the transit of sanctioned goods. Sellers and buyers have relied heavily on Turkey to circumvent restrictions by creating a complex network of supply chains through third countries.

There has been an increase in requests from Russia for assistance in delivering many goods across Kazakhstan's land border with Russia, sources said. Its length is more than seven thousand kilometers.

Reuters cites the example of a Kazakh businessman who said he was offered \$1 million to help transport a truckload of rare earths from Australia.

Kazakhstan closed its the trade representation in Russia in late February this year.

In early March, Bloomberg reported Russia was receiving chips and microcircuits through Kazakhstan, Turkey and the UAE, bypassing sanctions imposed by Western countries due to the invasion of Russian troops in Ukraine.

Question – Is this possibly creation of a parallel routing of lethal aid into Russia as well?

Russian and Chinese defense companies continue cooperation – After the start of the Russian war in Ukraine, Chinese state-owned defense enterprises continue to maintain active trade relations with Russian defense companies under Western sanctions.

Until at least mid-November 2022, Beijing-based defense contractor Poly Technologies shipped at least a dozen shipments of equipment to the Russian company, which is under U.S. sanctions, according to the records. Deliveries included, among other things, spare parts for helicopters and radio equipment.

The Ulan-Ude Aviation Plant, which manufactures military helicopters, also delivered parts and several helicopters to Poly Technologies last year. Most of the helicopter parts that were supplied to Russia were marked for use in the Mi-171 helicopter, which is designed for transport and search and rescue operations. At least three deliveries included products for the operation or maintenance of Mi-171Sh military transport helicopters.



Simultaneously, as CNN notes, there is no evidence goods supplied by China are directly used by the Russian army in the war in Ukraine.

Military and security experts say the parts supplied by the Chinese company are basic equipment for Russian aircraft. They note that these deliveries may be part of existing contracts and standard business relationships between companies.

Question – But does Poly Technologies supply parts for Ukrainian Mi-171 helicopters used in emergency medical uses?

Putin may be about to find his ‘Chinese wish list’ is wishful thinking - Putin has invited his international “best friend,” China’s leader Xi Jinping, to Moscow for a three-day state visit beginning March 20. There’s sure to be plenty of glad-handing, champagne toasts, a major press conference and – behind closed doors – serious discussion.

For Xi, it’s a high-profile trip: his first state visit to any country since being appointed to an unprecedented third term in office. Kremlin officials say the two leaders will be signing “important documents” that will “deepen relations” and solidify economic cooperation. But for both men, this trip is much more than just another chapter in what they both describe as a “no limits” friendship.

For Putin, it’s a welcome show of support from his biggest ally after a year of military failure to attain his so-called goal of “de-Nazifying and de-militarizing” Ukraine. Putin’s army is burning through military hardware, ammunition – and men. He has reached out to North Korea and Iran for weapons and drones, but getting more weapons, ammunition and perhaps drones from China would be a major victory for the Russian president. However, that could be a hard sell.

So far, Xi has been helping Putin by sticking to a delicate balancing act: refusing to publicly condemn Putin’s war and blaming the West for “provoking” Russia, while strengthening economic ties but stopping short of providing “lethal” military aid to Moscow.

A CNN investigation has revealed a Chinese state-owned defense contractor was sending helicopter parts and air-to-ground radio equipment to Russia throughout 2022, but that doesn’t appear to add up to “lethal weapons.”

The United States claims Beijing is “considering” providing military aid but, so far, the Biden administration says it has seen “no indication” that Chinese leadership has decided to proceed.

While Putin seems intent on fighting to the finish in Ukraine, Xi arrives in Moscow trying to burnish his credentials with a 12-point plan that would begin with a ceasefire. China’s Foreign Ministry says the propositions “boil down to one sentence, which is to urge peace and promote talks.”

The Kremlin says the plan deserves “careful attention” but the spokesman for President Biden’s National Security Council, John Kirby, says the proposed ceasefire is tantamount to “ratification of Russian conquest,” allowing Kremlin troops to remain in place, occupying parts of a sovereign country.

Xi is also making overtures to Ukraine, allowing China’s Foreign Minister to speak to his Ukrainian counterpart, urging peace talks. Will Xi reach out to Ukrainian President Zelenskyy after his meeting with Putin?

Putin has other things on his Chinese wish list. Western sanctions are cutting off Moscow’s access to microchips and other sophisticated technology crucial for Putin’s military industrial complex; China is a leading producer of those components (**Comment** – Albeit very low quality chips). China, however, faces a dilemma: it officially opposes economic sanctions but – so far at least – is trying not to violate them, fearing Chinese companies themselves might end up being sanctioned.

The Russian leader wants more trade with China, and Beijing is hungry for more Russian oil, but there’s a downside for Putin. Europe has stopped importing Russian oil and most natural gas. Russia is making up for that by selling to India and China – but at discount prices.

On Putin’s geopolitical wish list, Xi has expressed solidarity with Putin but he doesn’t appear to be fully on board with Putin’s onslaught against Ukraine – at least publicly. Even as the Russian president has made multiple thinly veiled threats to use nuclear weapons, Xi has warned against any such actions.

On the crucial issue of sovereignty, Beijing is performing another balancing act by not criticizing Russia’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty, while at the same time reaffirming that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries must be upheld.

China is watching the Ukraine war, taking notes and drawing conclusions for any future possibility Beijing might invade Taiwan and that’s complicated: insisting that China’s sovereignty be respected, while denying Taiwan’s claim to its own.

Still, as Putin and Xi sit talks, they seem to agree unreservedly on one thing: both want an end to the post-World War II “liberal world order” guaranteed by the United States. Both want to challenge the military and economic hegemony of the US. China would likely quietly welcome a Russian victory that humiliated the US and Ukraine’s western allies. (**Comment** – What is conveniently omitted in this thinking is that, for the first and only time in human history, one country has controlled all global oceans, but controlled them in order to guarantee free passage by all, and in so doing, spurred globalization as we know it today. China and Russia have both benefitted magnificently from this US-inspired freedom to trade across sea lanes previously beset with piracy and risk, and neither of them can provide similar guarantees. Not even close, but this obviously doesn’t factor into their thinking, but then again, logical rationale never does with authoritarian regimes).

But while Putin is a “true believer” in the West’s demise, Xi must surely be dismayed by Russia’s faltering military performance on the battlefield. The ICC arrest warrant for Putin over alleged war crimes is another troubling sign for the strategic partners, even if neither Russia nor China recognizes the court’s jurisdiction. Russia’s damaged economy can never make up for the loss of the European and American markets that would likely ensue if China wholeheartedly took Russia’s side.

Article from CNN earlier this morning.

China supplies Russia with copies of M-16, marked as “civilian hunting rifles” in customs papers - Chinese companies sent Russian entities 1,000 assault rifles and other equipment that could be used for military purposes, including drone parts and body armour, Politico cites data provided by ImportGenius.

The shipments took place between June and December 2022, according to trade and customs data obtained by Politico. China North Industries Group Corporation Ltd, one of the country’s largest state-owned defence contractors, sent the rifles in June 2022 to a Russian company called Tekhkrim that also does business with the Russian state and military.

Russian entities also received 12 shipments of drone parts by Chinese companies and over 12 tons of Chinese body armour, routed via Turkey, in late 2022, according to the data.

Da-Jiang Innovations Science & Technology Co., also known as DJI, sent drone parts — like batteries and cameras — via the United Arab Emirates to Russia in November and December 2022.

CNN reported earlier in the week Ukraine’s military had downed a Chinese UAV Mugin-5 in the Donetsk region. Mugin confirmed that it was their airframe, calling the incident “deeply unfortunate.” “We do not condone the usage. We are trying our best to stop it,” a spokesperson for Mugin Limited told CNN.

Russia was negotiating a serial drone production deal with the Chinese manufacturer of drones Xi’an Bingo Intelligent Aviation Technology in late February this year, Der Spiegel reported. It was reported that the company had agreed to test and provide Russia’s Defence Ministry with 100 ZT-180 drones by April.

Putin’s ‘henchmen’

Some members of the European Parliament continuously refuse to back resolutions against the Ukraine war. Novaya-Europe reveals their names and their connections with Russia.

A special committee of the EU released a report describing the Kremlin’s methods of interfering with democratic processes in the Union last March, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. One of the targets of the Kremlin’s efforts is the EU Parliament. This is where MPs loyal to Moscow can both publicly act from pro-Russian positions at sessions and lobby the Kremlin’s interests on the sidelines. It is possible to track “Putinist politicians” in the Parliament by using open data: it is enough to study how each MP votes when it comes to resolutions related to Russia and its allies. Novaya-Europe has collected data based on vote results in the European Parliament over the past four years.

The Parliament adopted a resolution demanding to recognise Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism by a majority vote in late November 2022. The decision was backed by 494 MEPs (members of the European Parliament) out of 705. The remaining MEPs, especially those who were present at the session and either voted against the resolution (58 votes) or abstained (44 votes), found themselves in the spotlight of media attention. Various media outlets tried to identify a group of MEPs loyal to the Kremlin, and some of those indeed turned out to be connected with Russia.

The November resolution is far from being the first occasion to reveal MEPs with a liking for Vladimir Putin’s regime.

After 24 February 2022, 10 out of the 12 adopted resolutions were on the Ukraine war and its aftermath. The EU condemned Russia’s aggression, endorsed adoption of additional measures to ensure food security and protect families with children fleeing Ukraine, and also recognised Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism, and the Holodomor as a genocide. The MEPs voted in favour of creating a tribunal to investigate the crimes of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in January 2023.

Out of 705 members of the European Parliament, an average of 531 (75%) supported the anti-Russian resolutions. A little over 6% (40) voted against, and the same proportion (6%) opted to abstain.

Apart from choosing between these three options, an MEP may also simply not participate in voting by either not attending a sitting or not “pressing the button”, leaving their stance unrevealed. In the total package we obtained, only 4.3% of MEPs used these two methods between 2019-2022.

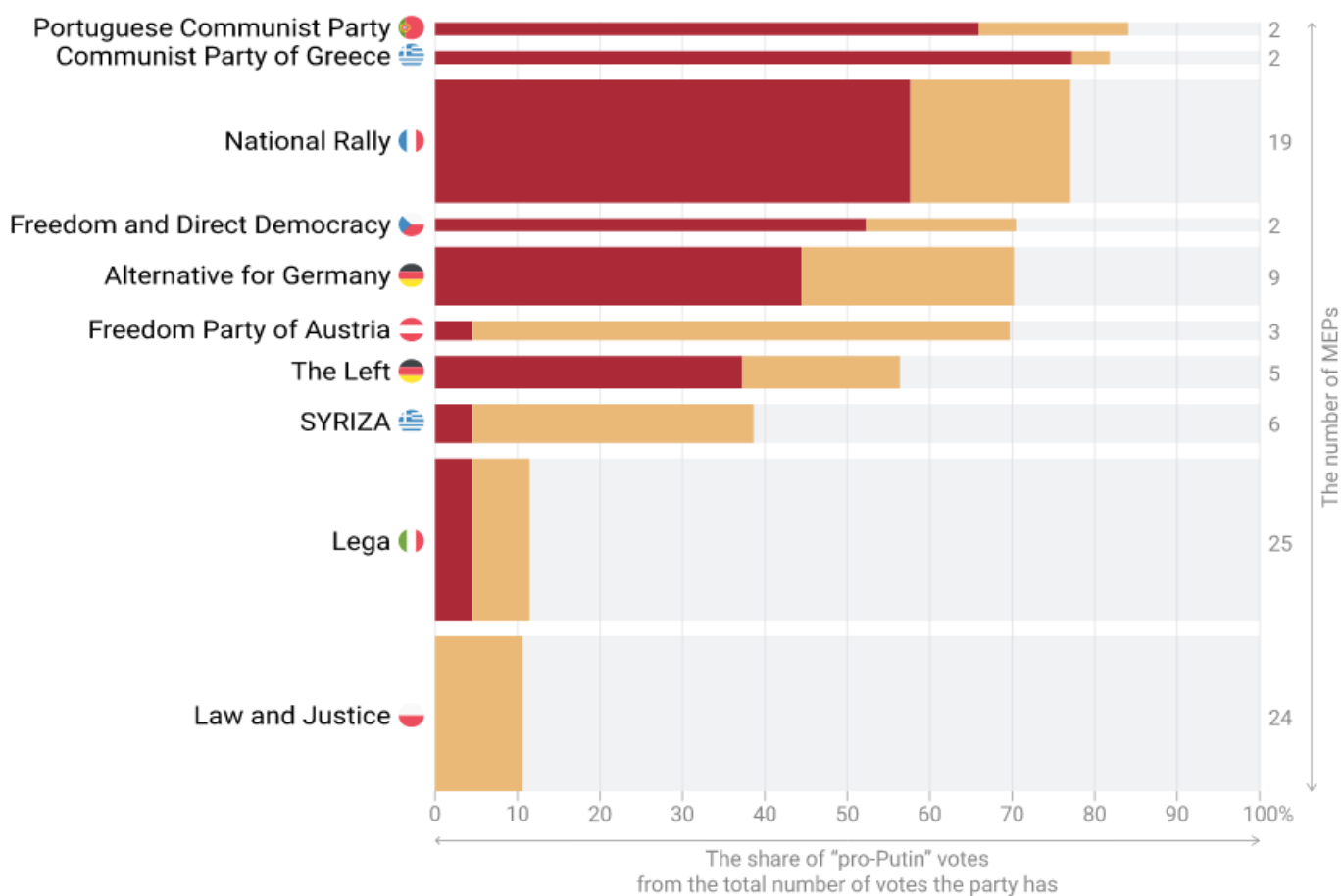
Novaya-Europe’s calculations show that the share of non-voters was three times larger when it came to anti-Russian resolutions. Such a deviation could hardly be an accident and means that some of the MEPs deliberately chose a strategy not to vote on documents related to Russia.

Parties: populists or Putinists?

Novaya-Europe’s calculations indicate parties with populist or radical policies vote against anti-Putin resolutions more often than others. Some of those include France’s National Rally, Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD), and Greece’s SYRIZA.

Leading “pro-Putin” parties in the European Parliament

Based on the number of votes **against** and **abstentions** during votes* over the period of 2019–2023



*on 22 resolutions that we analysed

Source: European Parliament, votewatch.eu

However, the “output factor” of each of those parties is different. In the first place, it depends on how many seats they have in the European Parliament, and the secondly is how decisively MEPs in question are willing to support Moscow’s interests.

For instance, some openly vote against resolutions, while others use a more cautious approach and prefer to either abstain or not to vote at all. From this perspective, the National Rally and Alternative for Germany parties remain the most useful for the Kremlin: they have 28 seats in the European Parliament together, and their MEPs often vote clearly “against” anti-Russian resolutions.

France - The French National Rally party has been formally led by Jordan Bardella, 27, since November 2022. There is no doubt, though, that Bardella is loyal to his predecessor, Marine Le Pen, and it is apparent that she is the one watching the discipline of her party’s members in the European Parliament.

Le Pen’s party had been accused of both fellow feelings and financial connections with the Kremlin before the Ukraine war. And although after 24 February, Le Pen condemned Russia’s aggression during her presidential campaign and even destroyed her campaign leaflets that showed her photo with Putin, at the European level, MEPs of her party vote in the interests of Moscow more often than others. For example, Jordan Bardella abstained or voted against on 17 of the 22 occasions we analyzed.

Germany - MEPs from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party voted in solidarity with the Kremlin’s position even more often than their French counterparts before the war. Tino Chrupalla, co-chair of AfD, visited Russia numerous times, meeting with Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s Foreign Minister. He spoke against anti-Russian sanctions and military aid for Ukraine even after 24 February. The Russian invasion of Ukraine influenced the behaviour of AfD representatives at the national level as the number of “Putinverstehers,” at least rhetorical ones, decreased in the first months of the war. But at the European level, every AfD MEP did not support anti-Russian resolutions at least several - times after 24 February.

Greece and Portugal - There is also a group of MEPs “useful” for the Kremlin among members of small parties. Two MEPs from the Communist Party of Greece and the Communist Party of Portugal almost always vote against anti-Russian resolutions.

Czech Republic - Two MEPs from the Czech nationalist, anti-immigration party Freedom and Direct Democracy also often stand up to defend Moscow’s interests. Such actions performed by small parties cannot affect the final decision in any way, but at the same time, they give the Russian state media an opportunity to declare that there is a lack of unity in Europe.

Austria - MEPs from the far-right Freedom Party of Austria act more cautiously, but also do the Kremlin’s bidding. Members of these parties rarely vote openly “against” anti-Russian resolutions, but often abstain from voting.

Poland - Among the most frequent abstainers are MPs from the Law and Justice (PiS), currently the ruling party in Poland. Novaya-Europe has found out that every one of the 24 representatives of this party in the European Parliament opted to abstain at least once, but at the same time, no one ever explicitly voted against between 2019 and 2023. And although there were no such “setbacks” from PiS, whose leadership now takes an extremely tough stance towards Moscow after the start of the Ukraine war, party members occasionally used to take an indistinct position on Russian issues before 24 February.

Hungary and Italy - Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, MEPs from Hungary’s ruling party Fidesz and Italy’s biggest right-wing party Lega also preferred to abstain from voting on anti-Russian propositions. Founders of these two parties, Viktor Orbán and Matteo Salvini, are often accused of having informal ties with the Kremlin.

Latvia - Tatjana Ždanoka, a member of the Latvian Russian Union known for her openly pro-Russian stance, tops the list: she rejected 20 out of 22 analyzed resolutions.

She is very forthcoming about her views. In 2014, she approved Crimea’s annexation and travelled to Russia in 2018 to observe the presidential election. She then admitted that there were violations but added that in her view they were “few and far between”. On 11 March 2022, she and her fellow party members held a rally in front of the EU mission in

Riga to show support for Russia. The event was attended by about 200 people. Tatjana Ždanoka cannot be elected to Latvia's national or city parliaments because she worked in the Latvian Communist Party after 1991. However, it does not stop her from regularly making it to Strasbourg, where the European Parliament is located, since 2004.

Putin's backers

MEPs who can be suspected of sympathizing with the Kremlin often do not stick to one particular tactic when voting on anti-Russian resolutions but combine votes against, abstentions, and refusals to take part in ballots. They sometimes even support these documents. In order to avoid confusion, Novaya-Europe has created a ranking of MEPs whose votes were used to prop up Russia's interests in one way or another.

There does appear to be a new grouping forming in the Parliament that is not so pro-Putin, but it is difficult to understand how consistent this trend of declining MEP votes for the Kremlin will be. A change of tactics does not always mean a change of position.

Moscow's most ardent supporters in the EU Parliament likely learnt in 2022 to act with more caution, not just openly opposing anti-Kremlin resolutions but resorting to other means. It is also possible that they have abandoned efforts to lobby for Russia's interests in the EP halls, switching to other forums instead.

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