

Conflict Update # 328

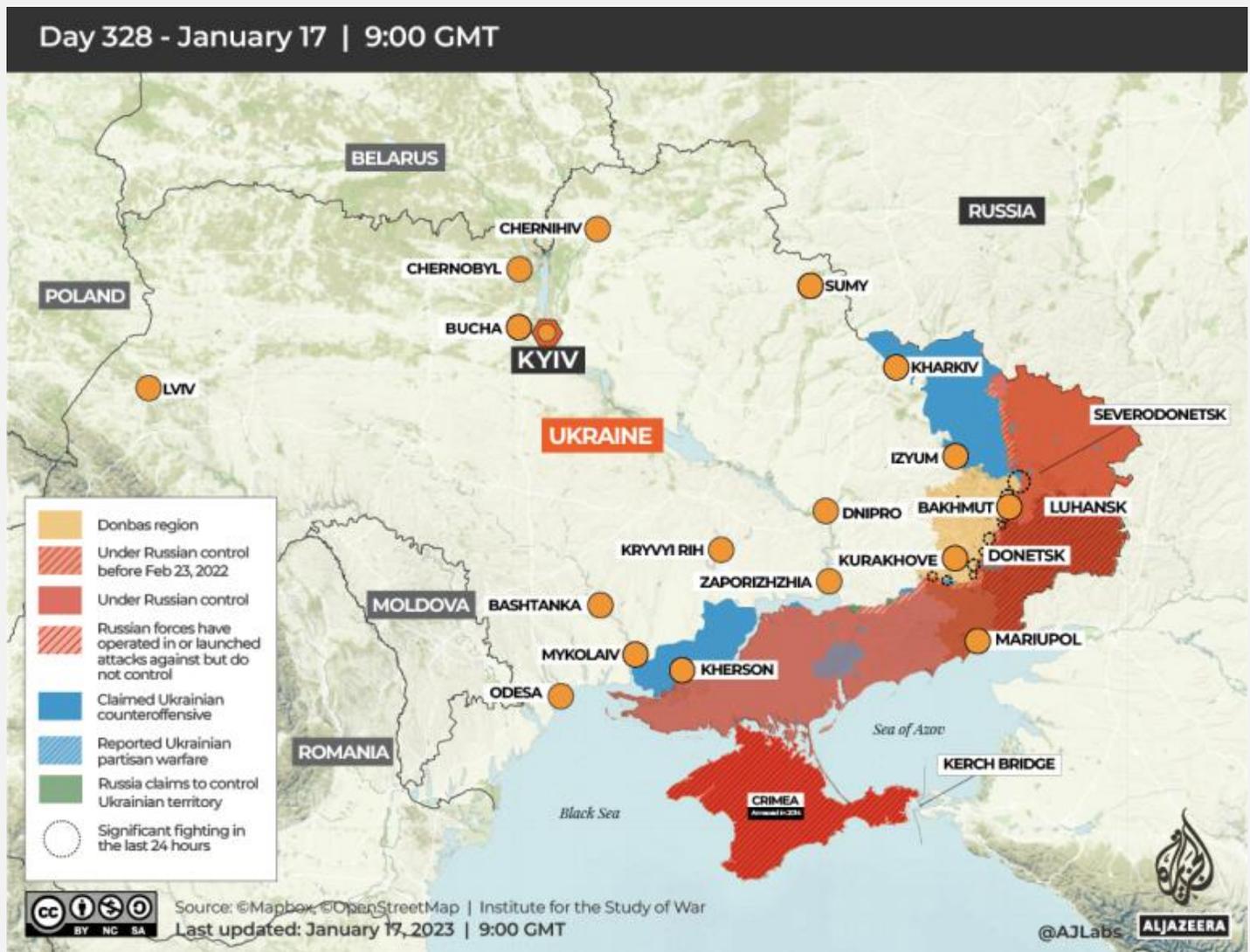
January 17th, 2023

Back issues at www.accgroupco.com

Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 116,950 (870) soldiers killed, 3,121 (+3) enemy tanks, 6,215 (+11) armored combat vehicles, 2,104 (+5) artillery systems, 441 (+3) MLRS systems, 220 (+0) air defense systems, 286 (+0) warplanes, 276 (+0) helicopters, 1,872 (+0) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 749 (+0) cruise missiles, 17 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,877 (+7) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 190 (+0) units of equipment.

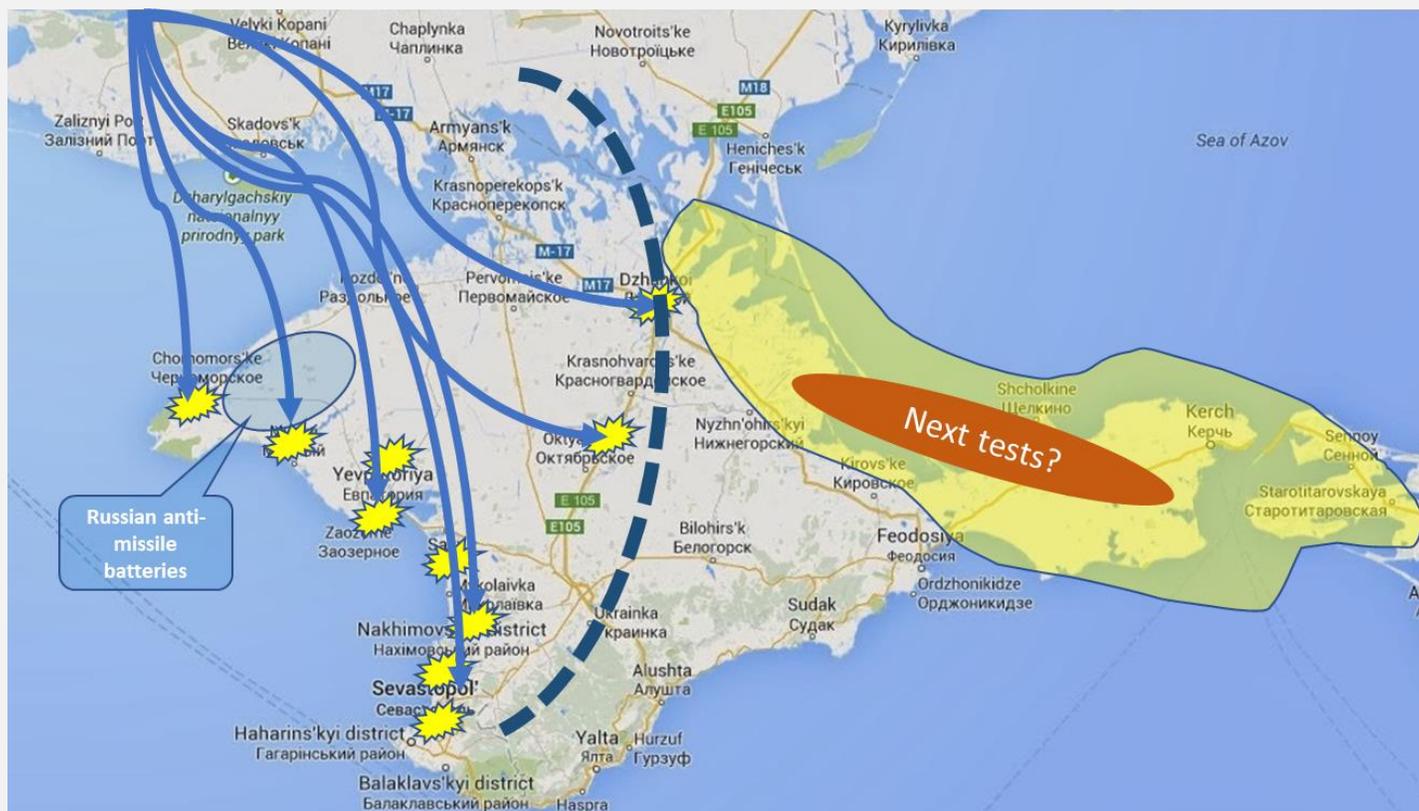
Key Takeaways



Ukraine testing Crimean defenses – Ukraine over the past 48 hours has been testing Crimean anti-missile defenses with low-cost drones.

Referring to the map below one can see the Russian anti-missiles battery zone along the northern shores of Crimea (in the blue shaded area). Ukraine purposely routed their drones from Kherson to the east and then banked them south – around the anti-missile platforms – and targeted Russian defense echelons further south and west.

They lost some of these cheap craft to anti-missile fire but learned safe attack routes in the process. Now it is thought they will test eastern Crimean targets next – to the right of the dotted line.



The questions are – Why? and Why now? – Why are they testing Crimean defenses in such a strategic fashion?

Perhaps because the ground is now starting to freeze? – preparing the way for a mechanized assault – with newly-acquired ground attack and support armor?

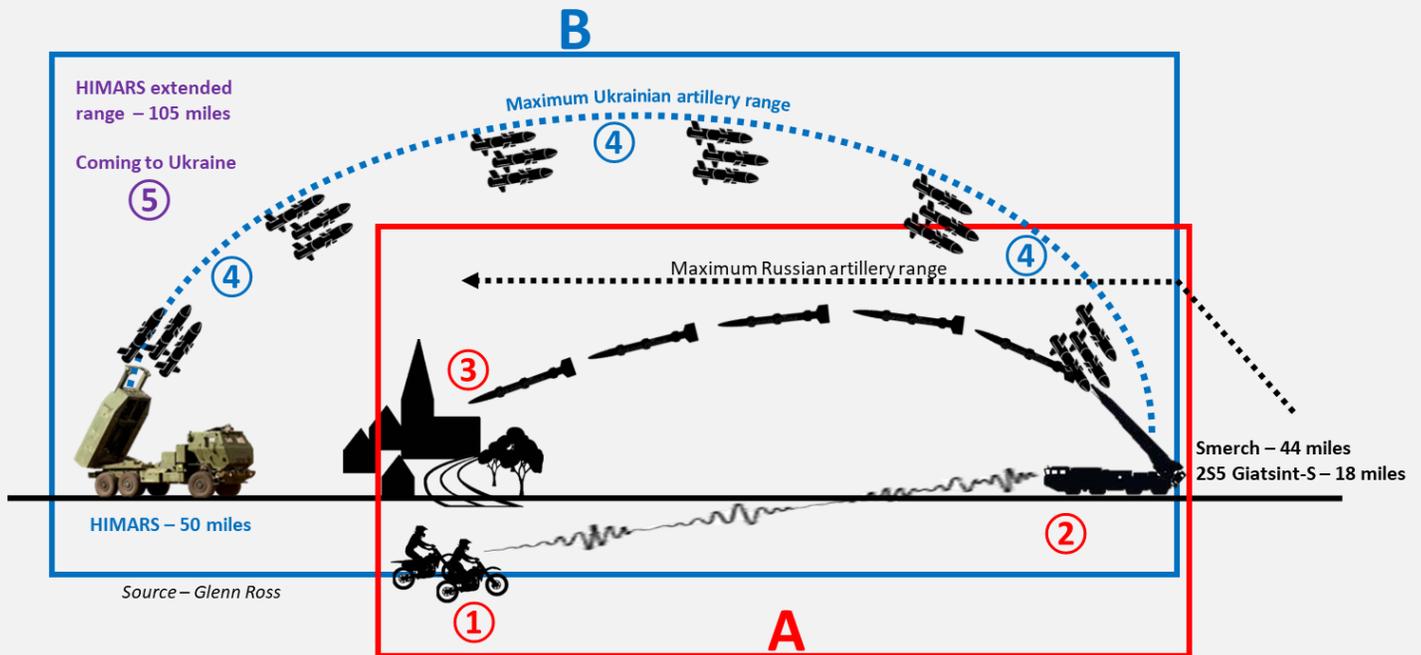
Successful assault(s) on Crimea severely disrupts Russian supply lines in to and out of Crimea through the Kerch Strait for onward passage to south-eastern front lines. This then forces them to use rail from Donetsk down through areas to Mariupol, Melitopol and Berdyansk – all reachable with HIMARS platforms.

Watch this space.

Effects of Ukrainian drone and missile attacks – Ukrainian drone and missile attacks on the Black Sea fleet and strategic airfields within Russia has forced the latter to move their forces further away and out of Ukrainian fire range.

Strategic bombers being used to launch missiles against Ukrainian infrastructure and civilian targets were relocated by the Kremlin from the Volga Province to the Far Eastern Province – thousands of miles away, adding hours to flight paths. The Black Sea fleet was moved further east toward the Russian port of Novorossiysk, out of effective attack range and essentially out of the invasion.

Front line tactics



A - Ukrainian pro-Russian scouts ① on motorcycles roam Ukrainian areas looking for targets, geolocate them and radio back to Russian artillery batteries ②, who then fire into the coordinates ③.

B - Ukrainian HIMARS artillery platforms then zero in on the Russian batteries ④ and destroy them.

The challenge though is that there are sometimes 5x as many Russian batteries as Ukrainian units, leaving the latter “outgunned,” a primary reason Kyiv is calling for additional artillery, particularly the longer-range variety ⑤ in order to strike Russian platforms from afar, and in so doing balance the Ukrainian artillery numerical inequality.

Ukrainian pro-Russian motorcyclists are becoming all too frequent lately but only in occupied territories where they are attached to the Donetsk and Luhansk Russian-appointed regimes.

The Kremlin has obviously learned from their early invasion tactical misadventures as these are the same tactics Ukraine used north of Kyiv when repelling initial advances from Belarus.

Calls mount for special tribunal for Russia’s ‘war crimes’ in Ukraine - Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, has accused Russia of carrying out “atrocious war crimes” in Ukraine and called for a special tribunal to be formed to investigate and prosecute them.

Speaking to Al Jazeera on Tuesday at the World Economic Forum in the Swiss resort of Davos, von der Leyen said Russia’s offensive requires a “strong reaction” from the “global community.”

Comment – First things first – formally label them a State Sponsor of Terrorism.

UPDATE Ukraine ends search for survivors at site of Dnipro missile attack - Ukraine has called off search and rescue operations at the block of flats in the central city of Dnipro where dozens of people were killed by a Russian missile attack.

The State Emergency Service said **20** people were still unaccounted after Saturday's attack and that the **44 confirmed dead included five children**. Thirty-nine people had been rescued from the rubble and a total of 79 had been hurt, the service said.

"At 1:00pm [11:00 GMT] on January 17, search and rescue operations in the city of Dnipro at the site of the rocket attack were completed," the emergency service wrote on the Telegram messaging app under a photograph from the scene.

Ukraine says the apartment building was hit by a Russian Kh-22 missile. Russia said its wave of missile attacks on Saturday did not target any residential buildings.

Russia hit Dnipro with 'carrier killer' missile made to destroy ships - The Russian missile that has claimed 44 civilian lives after striking an apartment building in central Ukraine was designed to strike aircraft carriers at sea, according to the Ukrainian armed forces.

A spokesperson for the Ukrainian Air Force said on Saturday that the missile used to strike the apartment block was one dubbed a "carrier killer," and "designed to destroy aircraft carrier groups at sea."

Yurii Ihnat, quoted by Ukrainska Pravda, added that the Kh-22 missile can also be equipped with a nuclear warhead.

According to Ihnat, the missile had been launched from a Tu-22M3 long-range bomber. He compared Saturday's strike to a Russian attack on a shopping center in the central Ukrainian city of Kremenchuk on June 27, 2022, which Kyiv's forces said involved an air-launched Kh-22 cruise missile, designed to target warships.

Ukraine's Security Service reveals names of Russian servicemen that may be involved in Dnipro strike - Ukraine's Security Service identified Russia's servicemen involved in the Dnipro missile strike, its website says.

According to the Security Service, "several dozens" of Russian servicemen were involved. The agency shared the names of six of those, all serving at the 52 heavy bomber aviation regiment:

- Colonel Oleg Timoshin
- Major Alexey Ivanenko
- Dmitry Golenkov, an executive officer of an air squadron
- Denis Grigoryiev, an orientation pilot of an air squadron
- Dinar Nazyrov, an orientation pilot of an air squadron
- Yevgeny Potseluyev, aircraft weapon engineer

The Security Service has initiated a criminal procedure against the suspects for violating laws and customs of warfare.

'Horrible' situation for civilians in Bakhmut - Al Jazeera's Charles Stratford, reporting from the outskirts of Bakhmut, says the situation in the eastern Ukrainian city is becoming increasingly "tense."

"There is an intensification in Russian shelling of the centre of the city and various areas on its outskirts too," Stratford said.

"The situation for the remaining civilians in Bakhmut is horrifying – it's estimated there are about 2,000 civilians still inside the city, of a population that used to be about 70,000 pre-war," he added.

"Many of them go to a volunteer centre in the centre of the city to get hot food and hot drinks – there has been no water supply in the city since October and no electricity since August."

Comment – Maybe time for missiles to rain down on Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Russia strikes one region 44 times Sunday, including kindergarten – A Ukrainian governor on Sunday said his region had been struck 44 times by Russian forces earlier in the day, including a school and a kindergarten.

Sumy Oblast Governor Dmytro Zhyvytsky said areas attacked in his region included the Bilopillia, Khotin, Seredyna-Buda and Krasnopillia communities. This included strikes.

Zhyvytsky said Russia used mines and drone explosives in Krasnopillia while Bilopillia got shelled by mortars 15 times, including damage to a school. A kindergarten and school stadium in the Khotin community were also damaged by other attacks.

NATO deploys surveillance planes to Romania - NATO surveillance planes are due to arrive in Romania on Tuesday to bolster the military alliance’s eastern flank and help monitor Russian military activity.

The transatlantic military alliance announced last week that it would deploy the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) surveillance planes to Bucharest, where they will start reconnaissance flights solely over NATO territory.

The aircraft deploying to Romania belong to a fleet of 14 NATO surveillance aircraft usually based in Germany. About 180 military personnel will be deployed in support of the planes.

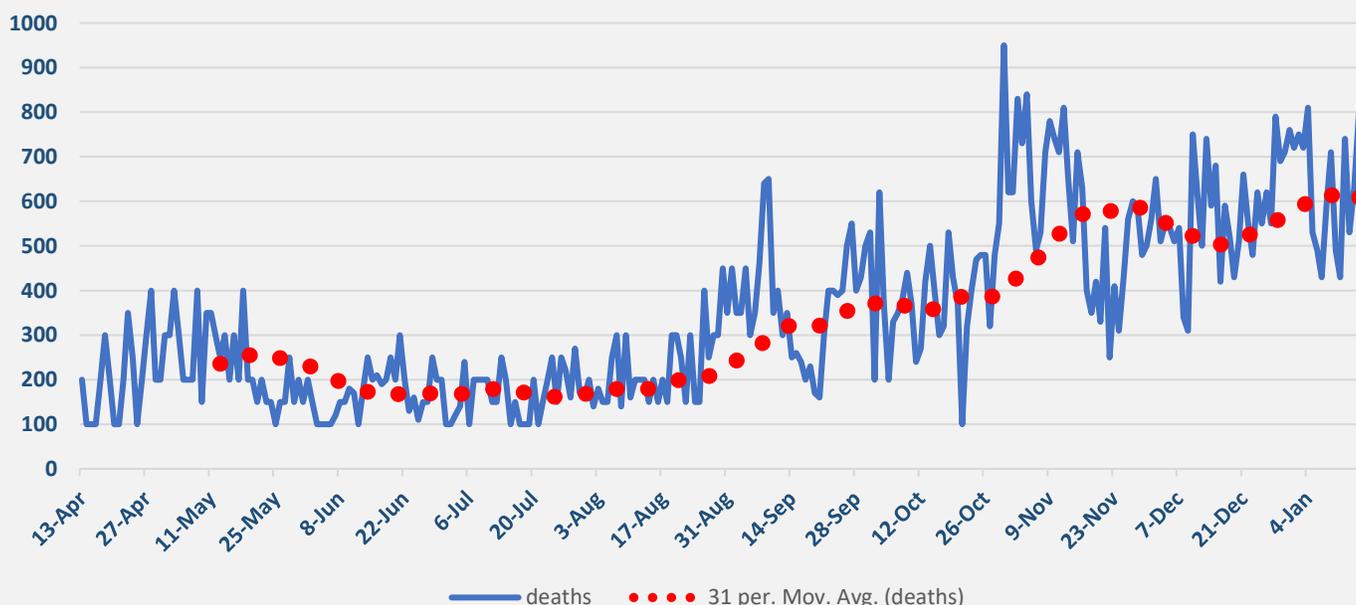
Europe awakens to the threat of sabotage by Russian agents - Suspicion has fallen on Russia over a series of confirmed or apparent acts of sabotage and espionage that took place late last year in Western Europe, experts say, with European countries increasingly taking measures in response.

Russia plans ‘major changes’ in armed forces from 2023 to 2026 - Russia says its armed forces will undergo “major changes” from 2023 to 2026, including changes in its composition and administrative reforms.

The defence ministry said the changes would happen as Russia boosts the number of its military personnel to 1.5 million.

“Only by strengthening the key structural components of the Armed Forces is it possible to guarantee the military security of the state and protect new entities and critical facilities of the Russian Federation,” Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

Russian troop deaths by day



Death toll mounting for Russian soldiers – in the past week 5,190 Russian soldiers have been killed and an estimate 12,000 injured. It is clear that Russian commanders are pushing newly-mobilized troops into suicidal missions in order to ferret out Ukrainian gunnery locations.

Since the illegal invasion commenced Russia has lost on average 357 soldiers per day, but alarmingly 536 since Ukraine commenced its September offensive, increasing to 575 per day in December and running at 639 this month to date.

Putin and the Kremlin are going to have to mandate a second mobilization as they are rapidly running out of soldiers to send to their death. With the January number of 637 killed supplemented by another 1,300 injured on a daily basis they will blow through what remains of that conscription program within 6 to 8 weeks from now.

Russia shoots own troops planning to surrender - Ukraine's General Staff reported Sunday that Russia has used a national guard unit to shoot soldiers who plan on deserting or surrendering to Ukrainian forces.

The Ukraine staff said in its daily briefing that Russia is using its Rosgvardiia force to shoot would-be surrenders "to maintain military discipline and prevent the spread of panic among personnel."

Rosgvardiia is the national guard composed of about 340,000 soldiers mostly employed to handle internal conflicts within Russia. Rosgvardiia troops reportedly shot six Russian soldiers who'd intended on deserting, the report read.

U.K. intelligence reported in early November 2022 that Russia began deploying such troops along the Russia-Ukraine border as "barrier soldiers" to prevent Russian soldiers from retreating by the threat of shooting them.

Comment – The Wagner Group and Chechnyan units have similarly been deployed behind front lines to ensure no Russian troops try to avoid the fighting or desert.

Ukraine's battlefields are freezing. Here's what that means for the war - Temperatures in eastern Ukraine have been well below freezing in recent days, hardening the ground and opening a window for potential winter offensives by both sides.

But such pushes may not come, either now or during a more sustained cold spell.

Military analysts say that while the shift from muddy to frozen terrain is important in enabling the use of wheeled combat and support vehicles, it's just one of many factors commanders would consider before a major new assault.

More important are the availability of reserves, equipment and ammunition, and the need to create weak spots in enemy lines.

Both sides are being stretched by slow but resource-sapping offensives. Russian forces are trying to take Bakhmut and nearby Soledar, while Ukrainian troops are attacking Kreminna and Svatove; all are small to mid-sized towns in the eastern Donbas region that Russia claims to have annexed but only partially occupies.

Putin

Putin's biggest fear: the Ukraine war could start a civil war in Russia - It is increasingly looking like a "Second Russian Civil War" could occur first.

It was just a year ago that Russia launched its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine – largely due to Putin's fear of a war with NATO.

A former Russian commander warned this past weekend that the conflict could result in a "civil war" in Russia, as the failures on the battlefield are increasingly likely to bring down Putin's government.

It should be remembered that the Imperial Russian government of Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown in the February Revolution of 1917 – resulting in the creation of the Provisional Government, which was itself overthrown by the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution later that year.

Russia was then thrown into a brutal civil war that lasted until 1922.

By launching the invasion of Ukraine last year, which experts suggested was to frighten NATO while expanding Russia's borders, Putin has, in essence, started the very conflict he sought to avoid.

Ukraine's continued Western support has pushed the Kremlin's forces back, and the war could even result in a complete defeat of Russia on the battlefield.

Even if Moscow can reverse its fortunes – which look increasingly unlikely due to the significant losses it continues to take – any form of victory will remain elusive and costly.

A Second Russian Civil War Brewing Thanks to Ukraine?

It was the handling of the war effort during the First World War while the Russian people suffered at home that ignited the February Revolution. One former Russian commander suggested his country was already on a similar path.

“There are all kinds of civil wars. There are civil wars that will kill our country in three days in winter. And it will be over in three days, but it will kill the country,” General Igor Vsevolodovich Girkin – who is also known as Igor Ivanovich Strelkov– said in a video shared on social media by Anton Gerashchenko, advisor to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine.

Girkin, who was a former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer, has called for the unification of the Russian Federation with Ukraine, Belarus, and what he has called other “Russian lands.” He is far from the only voice in Russia warning of an impending civil war.

Last fall, Mark Feygin, a former deputy in the State Duma and human rights lawyer, told Newsweek that a defeat in Ukraine could certainly result in a “bloody” civil war as a range of factions and regions seek power.

“What it will be depends greatly on the way this war will conclude,” Feygin warned, who suggested there is a way that such a horrible for the Kremlin could be avoided. “The easiest would be if elites inside Russia will make up their mind and choose a replacement for Putin, a replacement who could negotiate with the West, could provide some initial framework for concluding the logistics of that war, and then also work towards future elections.”

Putin seems in denial that Russia faces such dire straits.

Humanitarian

Zelenskyy calls on OSCE to do more about Ukrainians forcibly taken to Russia - Zelenskyy has called on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to do more about Ukrainians he says have been forcibly taken to Russia.

The OSCE is the world's largest regional security organization, consisting of 57 states and encompassing the US and all European states, including Russia and all states of the former Soviet Union.

“No international organization has found the strength to gain access to the places of detention of our prisoners in Russia yet. This must be corrected,” Zelenskyy said on Monday.

The US State Department estimated last year that between 900,000 and 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens, including 260,000 children, have been forcibly deported into Russian territory. Russia denies deportations and says those arriving are war refugees. In November, the country's emergency ministry said some 4.8 million Ukrainians, including 712,000 children, had arrived in Russia since February.

Comment - Russia desperately needs to bolster its lower demographic tier if it is to survive long-term growth. It needs to enjoy a fertility rate of higher than 2.2 whereas right now they are below 1.4.

Russia also enjoys the world's highest rates of alcoholism and deaths due to alcoholism.

This has been witnessed in areas where their troops have occupied Ukrainian towns and territory, aggressively seeking out liquor supplies before constructing defense barriers.

War Crime - Zelensky denounced the missile strike that killed 40 people in the central city of Dnipro as a war crime.

"There is no doubt: every person guilty of this war crime will be identified and brought to justice," Zelensky said in his nightly address late Monday.

Rescuers searched the rubble for 25 people still missing after one of Russia's deadliest attacks since its invasion Saturday.

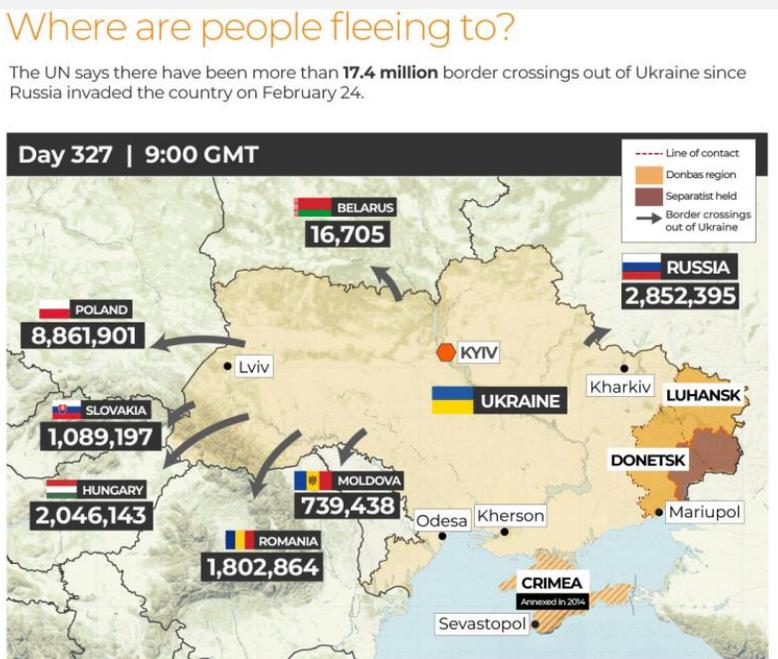
Emergency services gave the new toll specifying that three children were among those dead, with 25 people still unaccounted for. Seventy-seven were wounded in the strike.

The Kremlin claimed its forces were not responsible and pointed to an unsubstantiated theory circulating on social media that Ukrainian air defense systems had caused the damage.

Impacts

Ukraine proves the US army needs mobile, long-range, and precise artillery - The US Army is currently investing in two of the three critical capabilities for future fires systems (artillery, rockets, and missiles). These capabilities are range and precision. The Army even calls its fires modernization effort the Long-Range Precision Fires (LRPF) program. But what Army fires systems also need is mobility. While new systems such as the Extended Range Cannon Artillery (ERCA), Precision Strike Missile (PrSM), Strategic Mid-Range Fires (SMRF) and the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW) will be deployed in mobile configurations, the current plan does not envision a mobile system to replace the aging towed M777s, 155mm howitzers that equip a variety of formations, notably the Stryker Brigade Combat Teams (SBCTs).

This is a mistake. The Army needs to invest in a mobile 155mm howitzer, at least for its SBCTs. There are a number of foreign, truck-mounted 155mm systems already in service around the world that could be acquired. (**Comment** – See the South African G6 mobile howitzer, aging but still rated in the top two in the world).



To a large extent, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has turned into an artillery/missile war. Early on Russia was firing as many as 20,000 shells a day. The Russian army is paying particular attention to counter-battery fires, looking to use its advantages in long-range artillery systems to eliminate Ukraine's artillery.

Russian early success with its artillery and rocket systems led to the decision by the U.S. and other NATO countries to provide Kyiv with longer-range fires systems and precision-guided artillery projectiles. These systems have proven highly effective as well as survivable. The West has delivered an array of long-range fires systems, such as the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), and the M109 and PzH2000 tracked 155mm howitzers. Ukraine also has been the recipient of hundreds of old-style towed artillery pieces, including obsolescent U.S. M777s. However, these systems lack the range of MLRS and HIMARS or the survivability of tracked howitzers.

Russia has claimed to have successfully destroyed a number of MLRS and HIMARS launchers, which Western sources have dismissed as propaganda. Russia also has apparently not had much success against Western self-propelled howitzers, such as the M109. However, Russia seems to have had success in locating and attacking Ukraine's towed artillery pieces, both old Soviet equipment and the more modern Western models, which demonstrates how it would fare in a wider conflict. This success has generally been attributed to the inherently low survivability of unprotected artillery and the length of time it takes towed pieces to set up fires and then redeploy.

Range and precision are just two of three critical features to future fires systems that the Army has addressed in its LRPF program. It still needs to address the third feature, which is the mobility of fires systems.

Seven mobilized soldiers have been killed in Russia's western Belgorod region after a grenade was set off inside a temporary storage facility, detonating the surrounding munitions, Russian media reported Tuesday.

According to the Ostorozhno, Novosti news channel on Telegram, a 28-year-old platoon commander identified as Dmitry L. set off the grenade while trying to impress his subordinates. Fourteen soldiers were reportedly hospitalized.

The incident involving mobilized troops took place at a cultural center that was repurposed as a storage facility for Russia's military on an unknown date and was first reported Sunday.

Separately, five conscripts were reportedly killed and two wounded in an attack on a checkpoint in the Belgorod region village of Shchebekino on Monday.

Australian Open bans Russian flag after Ukraine complaint - Australian Open organisers have banned Russian and Belarusian flags from the Melbourne Park precinct during the tennis tournament after a complaint from Ukraine's ambassador to Australia.

Putin says Russian economy likely shrank 2.5 percent in 2022 - President Vladimir Putin says the Russian economy likely contracted by 2.5 percent in 2022 but it is performing better than most economists had predicted.

Speaking at a meeting with top officials, including his finance minister and the central bank chief, Putin also said real wage growth needed to be stimulated.

Comment – And now here I have a never-to-be-repeated offer from my late uncle.

Iran to receive Russian fighter jets by March in latest sign of growing military ties - Iran expects to take delivery of 24 Russian Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets by the end of March.

Iran's Tasnim News Agency cited the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Shahriar Heidari in announcing the delivery, which will also include "air defense systems, missile systems and helicopters."

Tasnim said that the Su-35 will be Iran's first foreign acquisition of fighters since it purchased "a few" MiG-29s from Russia in the 1990s. In 1992, the New York Times reported a much larger Iranian aircraft purchasing program, including more than 100 MiGs of various types purchased from Russia and former Soviet states.

The Biden administration first briefed reporters in December that Russia was training Iranian pilots on the Su-35 for a possible delivery in early 2023. "These fighter planes will significantly strengthen Iran's air force relative to its regional neighbors," US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on 9 Dec.

As a so-called 4.5 generation fighter, the Su-35 would be a substantial upgrade to Iran's aging aerial fleet, which continues to fly F-14 Tomcats acquired in the 1970s under the Shah and that were retired by the US in 2006.

The Su-35 is believed to be competitive with the F-15 and F-16 4th and 4.5-generation fighters operated US partners in the region including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, but is less advanced than the fifth-generation US F-22 or F-35, the latter of which has also been acquired by Israel.

The delivery would mark the latest example of ever deepening military ties between Iran and Russia. Ukrainian defense officials say that Iran has so far sent Russia more than 2,000 drones that have been used both on the battlefield and in indiscriminate attacks against Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure.

Comment – Hello Benjamin, can you hear me?

Containment

The U.K.'s top UK diplomat warned Putin earlier this morning Britain would support Ukraine until they win the war after Moscow expressed its anger at London's decision to send 14 Challenger 2 tanks to Kyiv.

"The message we're sending to Putin — and, frankly, anyone else that cares to be watching — is that we made a commitment to support Ukrainians until they are victorious," Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said on a visit to Washington.

"What Putin should understand is we are going to have the strategic endurance to stick with them until the job is done and the best thing that he can do to preserve the lives of his own troops is to recognize that," he said at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The United Kingdom will soon become the first nation to send its own heavy tanks to Ukraine - About those tanks: Ukraine's military leaders say they want 300 tanks to expel Russian forces from occupied land; but no one has 300 tanks to give to Ukraine, so Kyiv will have to cobble together whatever they can from different nations. To that end, Poland's president last week announced his intention to send 14 of Poland's tanks to Kyiv. However, the decision isn't really his to make, and ultimately depends on the approval of leaders in Germany, which manufactured the Leopard 2 tanks that Warsaw is trying to give Ukraine as the Russian invasion continues into its 12th month next week. While that Leopard 2 decision awaits, London went ahead and announced its latest moves—involving a squadron of Challenger II tanks bound for Kyiv sometime "in the coming weeks"—on Saturday.

US, Ukraine top military chiefs hold face-to-face talks - Top United States General Mark Milley has held face-to-face talks with his Ukrainian counterpart for the first time as Russia's offensive nears the one-year mark.

Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, travelled to an undisclosed site near the Ukraine-Poland border for the meeting with General Valerii Zaluzhnyi. The two leaders have talked frequently about Ukraine's military needs and the state of the war over the past year, but had previously never met.

Their meeting came as Kyiv's Western allies prepare to hold key talks on military aid for Ukraine on Friday at a US airbase in Germany.

Zelenskyy, German president hold talks on military aid - Zelenskyy says he discussed the need to increase military support for Ukraine during talks with his German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

He said in a post on Telegram that the pair had also spoken about the situation on the front line in Ukraine and the 10-point peace plan put forward by Kyiv during their video conference.

Moscow has rejected the proposal put forward by Zelenskyy. The plan calls for Russia to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and withdraw all of its troops from the country.

Putin slams increasing Western arms deliveries to Ukraine - The Russian president lashed out at Ukraine's Western support during a phone call with the Turkish president.

Putin yesterday slammed Kyiv's "destructive" policies and growing Western arms supplies to Ukraine in a phone call with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Kremlin said.

He said Kyiv was pursuing "a destructive line" and that it had "bet on the intensification of hostilities with the support of Western sponsors, who are ramping up supplies of weapons and military equipment," the Kremlin said.

Finland's PM pledges support for Ukraine as 'long as needed' - Finland is prepared to support Ukraine in its war with Russia for as long as necessary, the country's prime minister has said

"I think the only message that we need to send is One year, two years, five years, 10 years, 15 years," Davos.

that we will support Ukraine as long as needed. Sanna Marin said at the World Economic Forum in

Finland's government spent approximately 300 million euros (\$325m) on support for Ukraine last year, about 190 million euros (\$206m) of equipment.

million euros (\$325m) on support for Ukraine which was accounted for by military

Finland has been a steadfast supporter of Ukraine and Zelenskyy throughout the Russian invasion, Russian forces attempting to invade in the previous century.



supporter of Ukraine and Zelenskyy stemming back to when they defeated

Finland hopes to supply German-made tanks to Ukraine - Finland's foreign minister has said he is hopeful a decision will be made to supply German-made Leopard tanks to Ukraine, adding his country stands ready to supply the units.

"We are currently in intensive discussions on what more we can do as the European Union, [and] Nordic countries to help Ukraine," Pekka Haavisto said on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

"The discussion is ongoing about the Leopard tanks. I hope this decision will be made real and Finland definitely is ready to play its part in that support."

Sanctions

US imposes visa restrictions on Belarusian nationals - The US has imposed visa restrictions on 25 Belarusian nationals for what it says is President Alexander Lukashenko's "repression" of the country's people and their "democratic aspirations".

“We will not stand by as this regime continues to harass and repress peaceful protesters, the democratic opposition, journalists, unionists, activists, human rights defenders, and everyday Belarusians,” the US Department of State said in a statement.

The department cited the “politically motivated trial in absentia” of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and “other democratic activists on baseless charges” as evidence of Lukashenko’s curtailing of freedoms for the country’s citizens.

“We will continue to use all appropriate tools to hold to account those in Belarus standing in the way of their fellow citizens’ democratic aspirations,” it said.

Western goods reaching Russia through Georgia - The NYT has published an article by Ivan Nechepurenko about Western goods being imported into Russia, according to which, after Russia invaded Ukraine and Europe severed trade ties with the occupying country due to sanctions, Russia soon found alternative ways. The author notes that every day in Georgia trucks line up on the border with Russia.

“Loaded with automotive parts, industrial materials and various products, they wait several days to cross the border and complete the journey, which usually starts in Turkey and ends in various cities in Russia,” Nechepurenko writes.

As he explains, Georgia has become a convenient logistical channel between Russia and the outside world, and the transport of goods through Georgia and neighboring countries (Armenia and Azerbaijan) has helped Russia make up the consumer shortfall caused by the invasion of Ukraine:

“Although some goods are in short supply and many Western companies have suspended operations, the government says the Russian economy shrank by just 3% last year. While growth prospects remain bleak, the immediate collapse due to Western sanctions that some economists predicted has not happened.”

The article also mentions that it is the fastest land route from Georgia to Turkey, which has become for Russia one of the main trade routes connecting it with the West. The article cites a study according to which, in the first six months of 2022, the transit of goods between Turkey and Russia tripled, and most of it moved along the roads of Georgia.

“It is impossible to say what part of European cargo passing through Georgia is subject to EU sanctions. The emergence of the country as the main link in trade with Russia points to potential flaws in the EU sanctions policy,” Nechepurenko writes.

Russian Mobilization

Serbian president denounces Wagner Group’s alleged efforts to recruit Serbs - Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has called on Russia to crack down on alleged efforts by the Wagner Group to recruit Serbs to fight in Ukraine.

Vucic criticized Russian websites and social media groups for publishing advertisements in the Serbian language in which the paramilitary group calls for volunteers to join its ranks.

“Why do you, from Wagner, call anyone from Serbia when you know that it is against our regulations?” Vucic said late on Monday in a broadcast by the Belgrade-based Happy TV.

Serbian law prohibits citizens from fighting in conflicts abroad.

Kazakhstan ends indefinite stays for Russians - Kazakhstan will no longer allow Russian citizens to stay in the Central Asian country indefinitely by doing so-called visa runs every three months, according to a government directive published this week.

The Kazakh government will discontinue the practice from January 26 and will require Russians and citizens of other members of the Eurasian Economic Union, a post-Soviet bloc, to leave the country for at least 90 days after the permitted three-month stay.

Tens of thousands of Russians, mostly young and middle-aged men, relocated to Kazakhstan last year as Moscow, embroiled in the Ukraine conflict, launched its first conscription campaign since World War II.

Putin's mobilization decree "is still in force," a Pskov regional deputy said Tuesday, citing the presidential administration.

Deputy Artur Gaiduk said he had sent an appeal to Putin with a proposal to issue a decree that would formally end the "partial" military mobilization he announced in September to bolster Russia's forces in Ukraine.

The presidential administration replied that although "the call-up" has ended, the decree "is in force," Gaiduk said.

The Defense Ministry said last October that it had met the goal of mobilizing 300,000 reservists set during the five-week "partial" mobilization.

Observers have predicted that Russia could launch a second mobilization round in advance of a spring offensive in Ukraine.

Geopolitics

Renewed Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict underlines Russia's waning influence - In late 2020, when Putin brokered the end of a war in the Caucasus between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and placed 2,000 Russian peacekeeping troops between the two sides, it looked like a strategic masterstroke.

The deal gave Russia a military presence in one post-Soviet country, Azerbaijan, while deepening the reliance of another, Armenia, on Russia as a guarantor of its security. It positioned Putin as a peacemaker and seemed to affirm his claim to Russia's rightful influence, as the only power capable of keeping stability throughout the former Soviet sphere.

Barely two years later, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is heating up again, and Russia, distracted and weakened by the war in Ukraine, has not stepped in. Defying the Russian presence, Azerbaijanis are testing whether Moscow is still able and determined to impose its will on other, smaller neighbors amid its struggles in Ukraine.

Since Dec. 12, the mountain road linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia has been blocked amid protests by Azerbaijani activists claiming to be opposing illegal mining operations in the area. Azerbaijan's government has endorsed the protests; Armenians say Azerbaijan engineered them and criticize Russian peacekeepers for not keeping the road open.

"It can be seen that Russia's resources in the region are becoming limited," said Farhad Mammadov, a pro-government analyst in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. "Russia is becoming weaker."

Comment – Armenia was the very first country to adopt Christianity back in the 4th Century. Christianization of Armenia began with the work of Syrian apostles from the 1st century CE and was boosted in the early 4th century CE by such figures as Saint Gregory the Illuminator, who converted the Armenian king and spread the gospel message. A more complex process than legendary accounts portray, Armenia's adoption of Christianity was, nevertheless, a momentous chapter in the country's history,