

Conflict Update Day 400

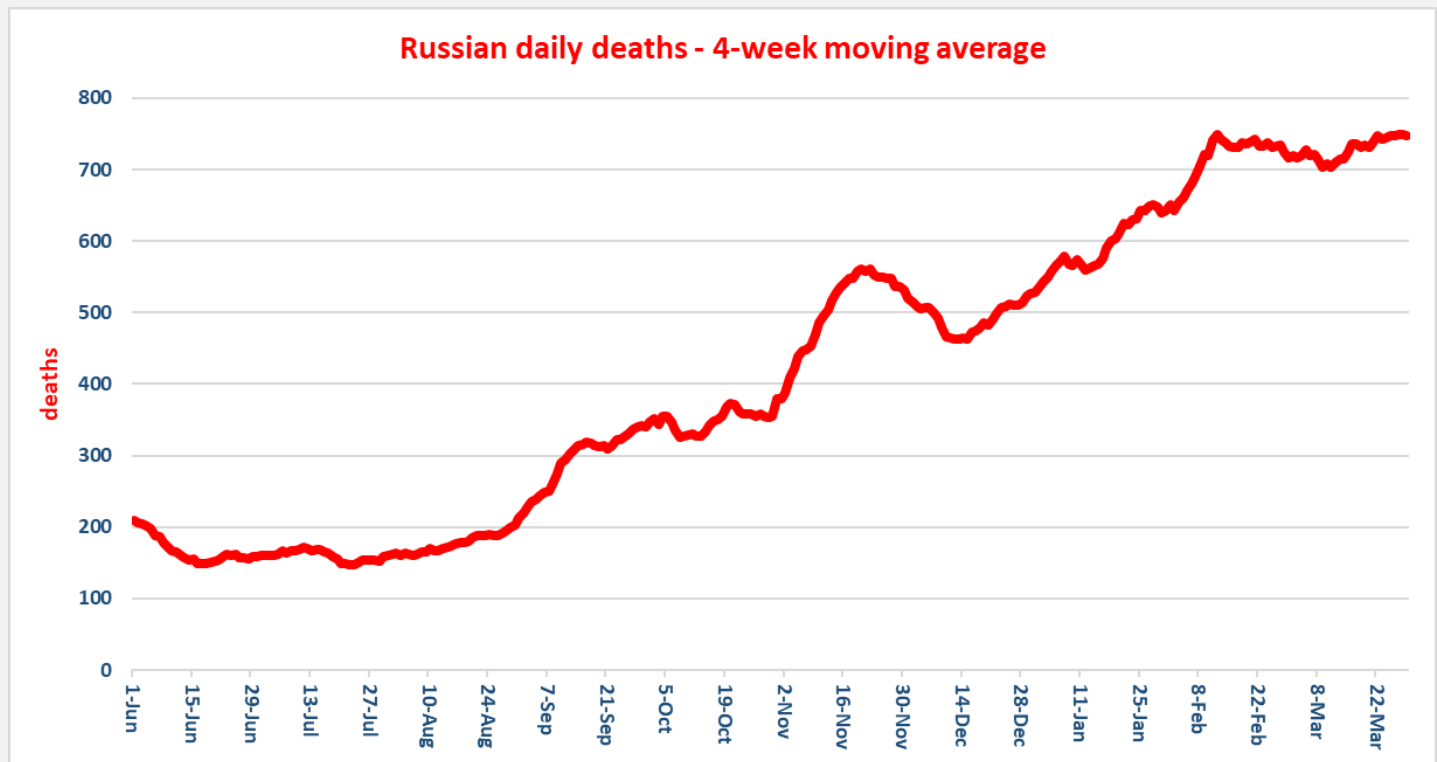
March 30th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 172,900 (+560) soldiers killed, 3,610 (+1) enemy tanks, 6,974 (+8) armored combat vehicles, 2,671 (+12) artillery systems, 526 (0) MLRS systems, 278 (+1) air defense systems, 306 (+0) warplanes, 291 (+0) helicopters, 2,239 (+0) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 911 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,518 (+11) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 291 (+3) units of equipment.

Death Toll



Key events

'It's a slaughter-fest for the Russians': Top US general on Bakhmut battle - Russia's efforts to take Bakhmut have become a "slaughter-fest" for its troops, Gen. Mark Milley said.

He said Russia has not made progress for around 20 days, and they are being "hammered" by Ukraine.

Russia likely wants a symbolic victory in Bakhmut, but its progress there has been slowing.

Milley was asked at a House Armed Services Committee hearing yesterday about Russia's failure to capture Bakhmut, despite months of fighting to take it.

Bakhmut is considered the bloodiest battle of the invasion so far. Milley said in response that he believes "Russians are struggling in a big way" there with command issues, logistics, basic tactics, and troop training.

"They are getting slaughtered, the Russian troops are," he said.

"The Ukrainians are doing a very effective area defense that is proving to be very costly to the Russians," he said.

Russia first started shelling the city in May last year, with fighting ramping up in August. Russia has slowly inched forward, but has failed to capture the city.

"They are getting hammered in the vicinity of Bakhmut and the Ukrainians are fighting very, very well."

Experts say that Russia considers the city a chance for a symbolic victory, after it failed to make significant territorial gains in recent months.

Western officials estimate that between 20,000 and 30,000 Russian troops have been killed or injured in the city.

Article from Business Insider earlier today.

'This is like a movie': Ukraine's secret plan to convince 3 Russian pilots to defect with their planes - At first, the Russian pilots all thought it was a scam. But they agreed to go along with it anyway, especially after the initial payments came through.

Last summer, a group of Ukrainian volunteers, working closely with their country's intelligence service, apparently came close to persuading three Russian aviators who were in the midst of bombing Ukraine to defect with their warplanes in exchange for \$1 million apiece. It was a bold, months-long operation, "like a movie," in the words of one of the Russian marks, a trio of exceptionally well-trained airmen who seemed amenable to betraying their motherland for a sum of money they'd otherwise never see in their lifetimes.

What looked like a legitimate plan to switch sides proved anything but. None of the pilots defected in the end.

There is strong evidence that most if not all of them were found out by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), one of the successor agencies to the Soviet KGB. Russian propaganda says the whole saga was in fact orchestrated by the FSB from the start. The Ukrainians insist the FSB only got involved late in the negotiations, after sincere commitments were made by each pilot.

Kyiv also maintains its failure to acquire Russian warplanes was nonetheless a mitigated success: It gleaned valuable technical information about Russia's air force and compromised three military officers, at least one of whom has not flown combat missions since. A complex intelligence operation thus devolved into a remote game of dueling counterintelligence narratives with both sides claiming victory.

Igor Tveritin, the oldest pilot, married with three children, was born in Melitopol, Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Union. His skillset is by far the most sophisticated, as he was originally trained to fly the Tupolev Tu-160 strategic bomber, a supersonic aircraft capable of launching nuclear missiles, akin to the American-made Rockwell B-1 Lancer.

When Bohdan first made contact with him, at the end of March 2022, Tveritin was based at Engels Air Base — a bomber air base that was struck twice by Ukrainian drones in December despite being far from the frontlines. He can be

seen standing in front of his then-bomber, pictured above, the Valery Chkalov (named after a famous Soviet test pilot), in a video recorded by Russian news outlet Vesti in 2013. Tveritin told reporters that "firing a missile is the main dream of a military pilot, we all aspire to this." The Valery Chkalov was known for also firing cruises at rebel targets in Syria as



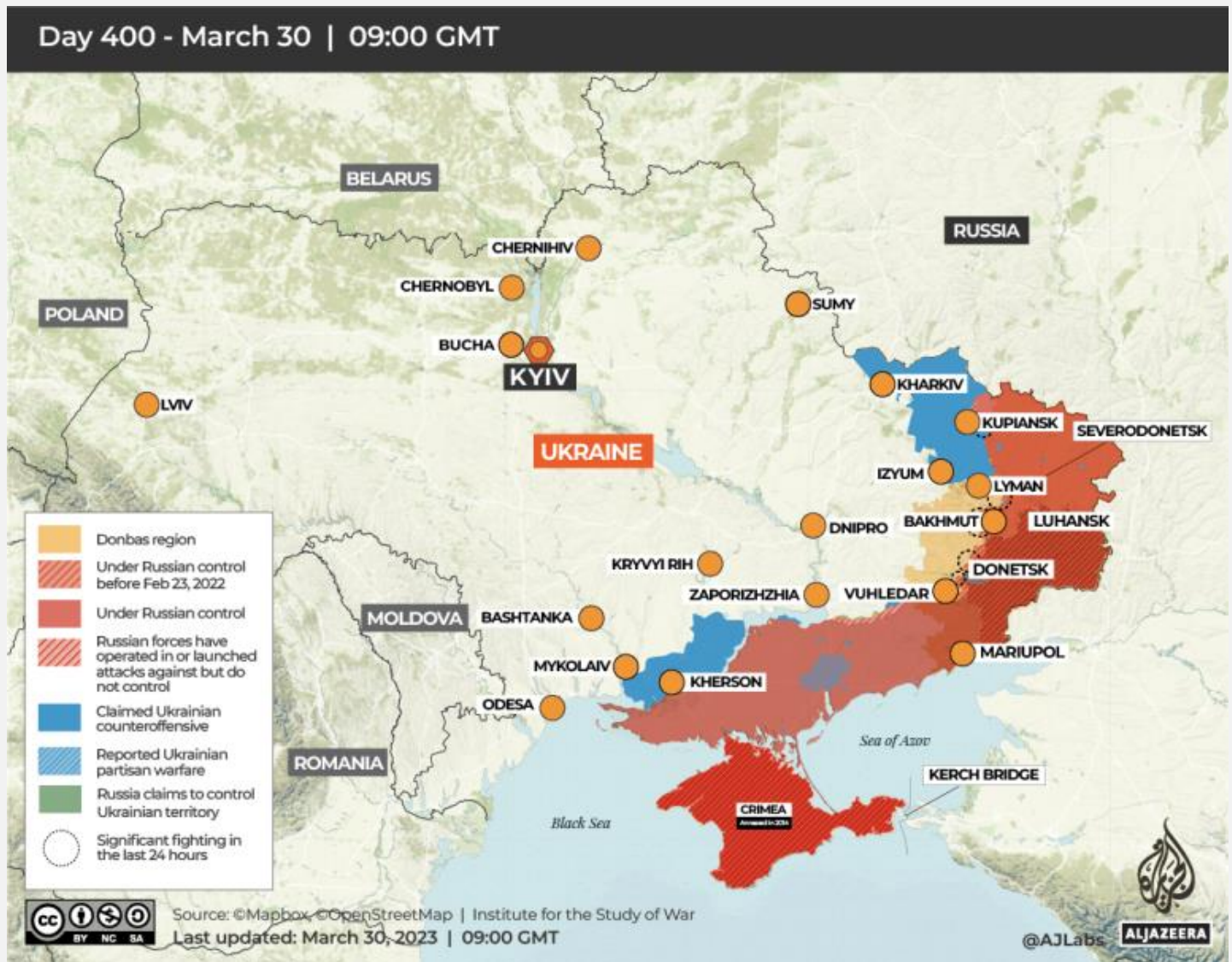
of 2015, the year Russia directly intervened in that country's civil war on behalf of dictator Bashar Assad. At some point, Tveritin was reassigned to fly missions in a Tu-22M3 strike bomber in Ukraine.

"I don't want to die," Tveritin texted Bohdan in Russian on April 29. "I am a realist, no one knows how things will work out. I agree to your conditions, but let there be two transfers of \$7,000. That makes me calmer."

The Ukrainian volunteers say the operation still ranks as a modest achievement for Kyiv. Tveritin, Bohdan claimed, is now grounded, based on call data from the last quarter of 2022. All three pilots also provided valuable Russian military secrets in the course of establishing their bona fides, including sharing images and recordings of the cockpits and instrument panels in their cutting-edge planes — Su-34s, Su-24s, and Tu-22M3s — as well as details of their air bases. And all it cost the Ukrainians was a few thousand dollars and a lot of patience.

Comment – More than likely, Tveritin's parents are still in Ukraine, as is the case with many Russian combatants. A very sad situation with thousands of Ukrainians sharing family ties with both Ukraine and Russia. There are streams of stories of Russian relatives of Ukrainians refusing to believe their stories of Kremlin carnage and massacres. Because they only hear the Moscow side of things.

Calling Bletchley Park, are you listening?



Ukraine says Russian forces make progress in frontline city of Bakhmut - Russian forces have had some success in the eastern frontline city of Bakhmut, Ukrainian military officials said, adding that their fighters were still holding on in a months-long battle in which both sides have suffered heavy casualties.

Ukrainian hacktivists say they've identified the Russian officer responsible for ordering last year's airstrikes against Mariupol's drama theater and maternity ward: Colonel Sergey Atroshchenko, pictured right. (they also managed to steal his wife's sexually explicit text messages and fool her into staging a group photo with several other pilots' wives.)

Disinformation from the Kremlin - On March 27, Russia's Foreign Ministry tweeted a video that purportedly showed Ukrainian soldiers terrorizing a mother and child "simply for speaking Russian," but the video was quickly geolocated to territory presently under Russian control, and the ministry quietly deleted the tweet.

How online investigators proved video of Ukrainian soldiers harassing woman was staged

These are scenes from a video widely circulated by prominent pro-Russian figures and their supporters on social media on March 27. A timestamp on the dashcam video gives the date of the footage as March 24, just after midday.

However, the facade presented by this footage began to crack when online communities attempted to verify its authenticity. While the video shows soldiers speaking Ukrainian and seemingly wearing Ukrainian uniforms, a geolocation shows that the video was actually filmed in areas deep behind the front lines in Russian-controlled territory — *an area over which the Ukrainian military has no control.* (*Bellingcat.*)

Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

Four bankers who helped Putin's friend set up Swiss bank account convicted - Four bankers who helped a close friend of Putin move millions of francs through Swiss bank accounts have been convicted of failing to perform due diligence in financial transactions.

They were found guilty earlier today of helping Sergey Roldugin, a concert cellist, dubbed "Putin's wallet" by the Swiss government.

The executives - three Russians and one Swiss - helped Roldugin, who is godfather to Putin's eldest daughter Maria, deposit millions of francs in Swiss bank accounts between 2014 and 2016.

The men, who cannot be identified under Swiss reporting restrictions, were found guilty at a hearing at Zurich District Court and were given fines totaling 741,000 Swiss francs (\$809,040.29), suspended for two years.

Russia's ghost fleet of oil tankers is a floating time bomb - Most people focus on the land and air aspects of the war in Ukraine, naturally enough — they are vivid and constantly being recorded and broadcast across the world's screens. But there are significant maritime activities occurring as well, from active combat (including the sinking of the Russian Black Sea flagship, the Moskva, last April) to commercial shipping of grains under a complex trading agreement brokered between Russia and Ukraine.

Another watery part of the war, occurring on oceans around the world, is the smuggling of Russian oil, heavily sanctioned in the West, in so-called shadow tankers. The ships operate without transponders - thus avoiding detection and tracking - and the insurance, regulation and national oversight required of legitimate commercial vessels. A good example is a 26-year-old tanker called the Turba, which hasn't had a full inspection since 2017 but has been reported collecting heavy oil at St. Petersburg.

The Turba is part of a huge ghost fleet of hundreds of uncredentialed vessels pressed into service by Moscow, which can no longer rely on Western companies to haul its oil. By one estimate, there are more than 500 such vessels representing over 10% of the global commercial activity for transporting hydrocarbons.

When I was supreme allied commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, I worked extensively with the IMO, located in London and part of the UN umbrella of international bodies seeking to bring order to the chaotic seas. At the time, I was struck by the regularity with which the major shipping companies took their big tankers out of service at around 20 years of life.

Now on the board of the Onassis Foundation, which operates a fleet of tankers and other vessels, I see the logic behind this: The downside of a potential environmental catastrophe, along with the expense of continuous repairs and inspections, outweigh the economics of using these hulls past two decades. Many companies look to scrap the ships from around the 15-year mark. While occasionally shippers will stretch beyond the two-decade point, that is generally rare. The sea simply beats the hell out of these hulls, and the natural corrosion of saltwater compounds the problem.

All reputable companies use a system of “special surveys” — detailed inspections that occur at least every five years when a ship is young, and more frequently as it ages. The inspections are thorough and very expensive — costing as much as \$4m. But because of sanctions on Russian energy products, an entire industry of opaque entities is buying up older, uninspected tankers and pushing them into Putin’s service.

To avoid scrutiny, the oil transfers are often done at sea, a very risky operation. I did hundreds of such transfers between Navy ships as a sea captain — they are an operational necessity — and they are nerve-wracking events with the possibility of a major environmental calamity hovering over them. Compounding the problem is the system allowing vast numbers of ships to fly so-called flags of convenience from small countries that lack the means to enforce even basic safety standards.

The result is hundreds of vessels and India, while avoiding any And the danger of a catastrophe is not 2002, a 26-year-old called the Prestige, under the flag, broke apart more than 50,000 of fuel oil along and Portuguese with a massive marine life, fishing and tourism that lasted years.



routinely hauling Russian oil, primarily to China serious oversight. serious theoretical. In old tanker operating Bahamian and leaked metric tons the Spanish coasts, effect on commercial

The international community needs to crack down on the new shadow fleet. It is not only permitting Putin to fund his illegitimate invasion; it is a ticking time bomb environmentally.

The IMO should convene an immediate dialog of all major flag nations and lay out the dangers of this illicit behavior, demanding fresh inspections and switched-on transponders. China and India (and other consumers of Russian oil) should be strongly encouraged to stop facilitating these risky transfers. If necessary, Western coast guards and navies should be empowered by the UN to enforce international standards for safe fueling operations, both in port and on the high seas. We must address this global maritime crime scene.

Admiral James Stavridis in Bloomberg.

Where are people fleeing to? - According to the United Nations refugee agency, there have been nearly 20 million border crossings out of Ukraine since the Russian invasion began in February 2022. Many people have sought refuge in neighboring countries.

This is a welcome sense of fraternity between countries wary and fearful of Putin and the Russian Federation.

But it brings with it a problem, and a problem that has plagued the EU for centuries.

Whenever there has been war in the EU, or adjustment of borders between countries or, as happened in the 1919 Paris Peace Accords, new countries formed out of previous geopolitical boundaries, there is fashioned a new demographic issue. And they tend to hang around, festering for millennia, but never truly “going away.” They always seem to return with a vengeance, resulting in turmoil and tragedy.

Indigenous “peoples” are misplaced, realigned or forced into a new political reality, being thrown into a demographic mix not of their liking or choice.

One need only look at the Balkans through the 1990’s, the Armenian genocide in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and African countries vying for tribal identities.

Now take Poland, a 92% Catholic country with a population of 38,5 million in their 2011 Census, as an example. Looking at the above UN border crossings table, 10,5 million Ukrainians have crossed into Poland since last February.

That amounts to a population increase of some **27%**, more than a quarter of the indigenous Polish population.

The Poles have been magnanimous in their hospitality and, yes, they do fear a rising Putin and Russian war threat, but have stepped up more than any other country in aiding Ukraine and its citizens.

But the longer this demographic conundrum drags on, the more resentful and anti-immigrant ordinary Poles will become.

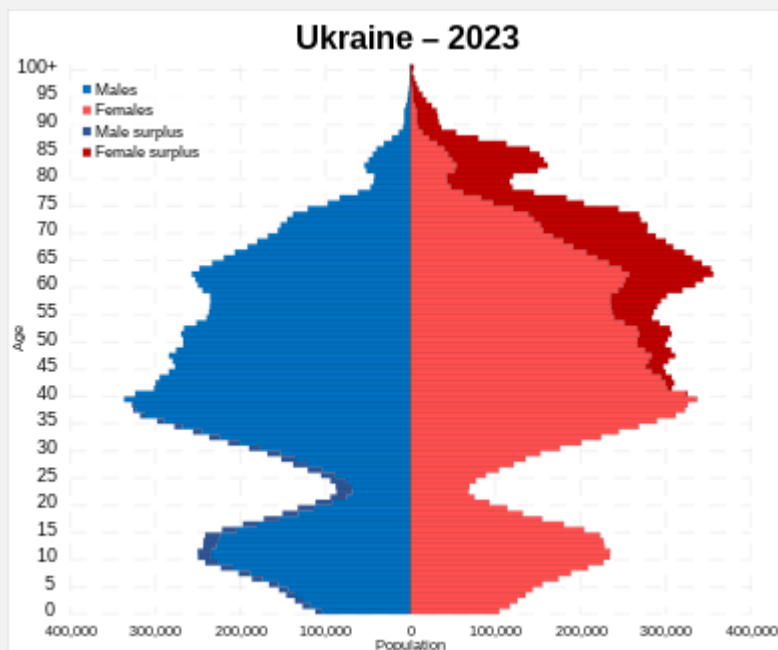
Viewing Ukraine’s demographic profile to the right, one can see an inverted shape, with a dearth of citizens aged 15 years to 30 years – the primary working and spending age, the age that drives a country’s economy.

There is a huge imbalance in older folk, generally speaking the investors in a country’s economy, but now devoid of funds to invest, given the financial destruction wrought on the general populace since February last year.

Ukraine's population is overwhelmingly Christian; the vast majority, nearly two thirds, identify as Orthodox Christian, whilst Catholic Ukrainians number between 10% and 12% of the population.

Injecting this many “foreigners” into a country, and if left unaddressed, will create future challenge and potential bloodshed. There are just too many examples to quote of religious wars in and around Europe over past centuries, not the least of which late in the previous one.

Poland	10,452,014
Russia	2,852,395
Hungary	2,414,914
Romania	2,153,896
Slovakia	1,266,790
Moldova	798,585
Belarus	16,705
	19,955,299



If left unaddressed, how long before the presence of Ukrainians, then long-present in Poland, starts to irk Poles in general, and leaders seeking issues to gain political power?

When cultural trends start manifesting and economical issues rise, we can fully anticipate a Polish reaction followed by rejection, and then followed further by outright animosity.

There are Ukrainian/Romanian issues still unresolved from the previous re-making of international borders in this region, some of which will surely be dredged up and quoted by Polish agitators seeking political leverage.

Not the first time has Europe experienced this dilemma, and certainly not the first time Poland has, with its history of changing borders, the Lithuanian/Poland Empire, reign of Sobieski, and not least, its Prussian history. Poles are exceptionally aware of this dynamic, being as it has the fundamental element in the creation of modern-day Poland.

Extending this demographic/immigrant comparison to other surrounding countries, Ukrainians in Hungary represent a 25% increase, Slovakia 23%, Romania 9% and a whopping 31% jump for Moldova.

Moldova, already experiencing a major problem with its Russian-speaking-and-leaning population grouping in its east, and the cause of 1,500 Russian "peacekeepers" being stationed in its Transnistria Oblast, will see increasing tension. An abundance of Ukrainians remaining in the country for any extended length of residence, indeed raises a high probability of negative interaction between them and "Russian" Moldovans.

Russia, with its long Stalinist history of displacing people within its own borders, will be keenly aware of this delicate and developing demographic "test," and just as keen to exploit it to Russian benefit and favor.

A demographic tinderbox the world needs to recognize and address.

Brazil, China strike trade deal agreement to ditch US dollar - Brazil and China have reportedly struck a deal to ditch the US dollar in favor of their own currencies in trade transactions.

The deal, announced Wednesday, will enable China and Brazil to carry out trade and financial transactions directly, exchanging yuan for reais – or vice versa – rather than first converting their currencies to the US dollar.

The Brazilian Trade and Investment Promotion Agency said the new arrangement is expected to "reduce costs" and "promote even greater bilateral trade and facilitate investment."

China is Brazil's largest trading partner, accounting for more than a fifth of all imports, followed by the US, according to the latest figures. China is also Brazil's largest export market, accounting for more than a third of all exports.

Brazil is the largest recipient of Chinese investment in Latin America, driven by spending on high-tension electricity transmission lines and oil extraction. *Article by Bradford Betz in Fox Business today.*

Officers make life hell for women in Russia's military, a female medic says - "Sometimes it seems like someone is walking outside the window," said Margarita, a Russian military medic who has been on medical leave in Belgorod for the past two months receiving psychiatric treatment following her service in Russia's war in Ukraine. "Sometimes objects seem to move. Or it as if someone is sitting on me. I have constant nightmares and panic attacks."

Margarita, whose real name has been concealed to protect her from potential reprisals for speaking out, told RFE/RL's North.Realities she has been in therapy and taking powerful antidepressants in a bid to cope with what she experienced as part of Russia's invading army in Ukraine. But what she fears most, she says, is being sent back.

"Even when other people are around or I am busy doing something," she said, "I can constantly see all those horrors."

During her months as a medic in Ukraine, Margarita said, she experienced severe sexual harassment herself and witnessed harassment, assault, and other crimes against women serving with her. She was also told of incidents in

which officers threatened and abused soldiers who were reluctant to go into combat and encountered soldiers who had mutilated themselves in an effort to be sent back home.

RFE/RL has confirmed the basic facts of Margarita's life and service record but has not been able to verify the details of her time in Ukraine, largely because of Russian government restrictions on reporting from the war zone.

Her nightmare, she said, began before she even had a proper uniform. "As soon as I arrived in the Nizhny Novgorod region, at Novosmolino, a colonel noticed me in formation," she recalled. "He was the commander of the 10th armored division. He said, 'Margo, come with me.'

"He ordered I be given a uniform and that I report to work in his headquarters," Margarita said. "After I got to know some of the people there better, they told me, 'The colonel has his eyes on you. You will probably be his field wife.'"

When she asked what that meant, they told her, "cooking, cleaning, and indulging him," suggesting a sexual relationship.

She said she resisted his increasing pressure for nearly a month when the unit was sent to the combat zone in Ukraine, where Russian forces were continuing the massive, unprovoked invasion launched in February 2022.

When the officer realized she would not be his field wife, he ordered Margarita's life be made a living hell, she said.

"When we arrived at the front, I finally was assigned to the medical unit," she recalled. "The officer there told me that the colonel had ordered that I be 'harshly punished.' For a month, I basically lived outdoors. While everyone else was quartered in buildings or barracks, I slept on the ground in a field tent by the road."

"Sometimes I was also not given rations," she added. "They wanted to break me so that I would agree to sleep with him. But I held out. And when he realized I wouldn't submit, he transferred me to an artillery unit close to the front. I thought I would die there."

Seven Women

Margarita said there were seven other women in her medical unit, between the ages of 23 and 38, and that all of them faced pressure to become field wives for officers.

"One got it from an intelligence officer," she said. "Another from a tank commander. A third from an infantry officer. When we arrived, no one knew what was going on there. And by the time we figured it out, it was too late."

Margarita said she saw "with my own eyes" how one officer shot and seriously injured a female soldier.

"Whether they were drunk or whether jealousy was involved, I don't know," she said. "But he tried to make it look like the Ukrainians had done it, even injured his own arm and said he had been protecting her."

The woman was permanently disabled and has undergone five operations to repair the damage the officer caused.

"Now she is back home in Buryatia, but this month she will travel back to Moscow for another operation," Margarita said, adding that the officer, who used the call sign Akatsia, had beaten the woman on several prior occasions.

Eventually, almost all of Margarita's seven female colleagues, under the pressure of threats or hellish conditions, gave in to the officers, she said.

"[One woman] gave in as early as September," she recalled. "They just told her bluntly: 'This guy likes you, and you will be with him.' She was also from Belgorod. She never came back to our unit."

Marina Zaitseva is a St. Petersburg native who served in the Russian military in Chechnya from 2001 until 2006 and retired from the military in 2019. She told RFE/RL that field wives are an open secret in the military and that she encountered the practice during her own career. *(Article extracted by Anton Starikov of RadioFreeEurope earlier today.)*

'Completely Mad' – Valentina Melnikova of the banned Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia said she had encountered only a few cases of servicewomen complaining of rape or harassment in the military. She believes most victims are simply unwilling to come forward.

A female medic told RFE/RL that some of the soldiers treated for injuries told her officers had tortured and shot at soldiers for refusing to go into combat. That, in some cases, soldiers were held naked in rat-infested basements until they relented.

In one case, officers forced such soldiers to dig their own graves, she claimed.

"They dug a pit and then were forced to lie down in it," Margarita said. "Then others, at gunpoint, were forced to shovel in dirt from above."

After the men were covered, an officer would fire his weapon blindly into the pit.

"If they hit someone, too bad," she said. "Anyone who survived crawled out of that pit completely mad. They didn't care what happened to them next."

'Nothing To Do But Amputate' - Conditions on the front lines were so bad, that some soldiers mutilate themselves in a bid to be sent home.

"They had nothing," it is said, "The boys in the trenches were hungry and in rags. They hadn't been paid for months."

Frontline troops lacked ammunition, grenades, and transport, it was added.

"Everything was stopped, destroyed, or broken down," it was reported of military vehicles. Margarita, a Russian military medic who has been on medical leave in Belgorod for the past two months, says "When I was in the Nizhny Novgorod region, I saw enormous transport trains of equipment -- tanks, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled artillery.... We were shipped to Ukraine on such a train and waited forever while it was unloaded. But when we got to the front, there was almost nothing to fight a war with. What happened to it? I think it was sold to the Ukrainians, and I'm not the only one."

Some of the soldiers she treated were suffering from self-inflicted wounds, she said.

"They would shoot themselves in the leg because after weeks in the trenches they couldn't even walk anymore," she said. "The damp and freezing conditions just rotted their feet. When their boots were removed, I was in horror; I'd never seen such things before. Gangrene, dried blood -- you couldn't even find their toes. There was nothing for us to do but amputate."

In the end, Margarita couldn't stand any more. She was sent home for psychiatric care at a civilian hospital in Belgorod.

Despite everything she endured and her fear of being sent back to the war in Ukraine, she said she hopes to return to the military with a different unit. She said she wasn't made for civilian life and salaries in Belgorod are too low.

"I'd like to help the boys, at least a bit," she added. "I have some sort of sense of an unfinished obligation. I don't know, maybe I'm just crazy. But, yes, I'd probably serve again."

Comment – What more can be said of Russian officers but “Animals.” Obvious Golden Horde and Mongol DNA has not left their blood.

Putin & Russia

The frank call between two Russian socialites – and what they said about Putin - Putin is a “dwarf” and a “wimp” who is ruining Russia, according to a leaked phone conversation between two prominent society figures.

The unusually frank call purportedly involves Iosif Prigozhin, pictured right of Putin, a music producer, and Farkhad Akhmedov, pictured to the left, an Azerbaijan-born energy billionaire, and has exposed deep resentment towards the Kremlin among the country’s overtly pro-regime elite.

In the 35-minute conversation, Mr Akhmedov calls Putin “Satan”, a “wimp” and a “dwarf” who “doesn’t give a damn about anything and doesn't give a f--- about the people”.

“They f----- us over, f----- over children, their future, do you get it?” he adds.

Prigozhin replies: “They’re criminals, to be honest, criminals of the worst kind. He [Putin] squandered the country away ... There won’t be any future for us.”

Akhmedov later says: “He has buried the entire Russian nation... How are we going to wash this off? This is a war between f----- brothers. There will be fascism there, that’s what’s going to happen... a military dictatorship. You will see. It’s going to end like this.” *Report by Reuters.*

'Delusional' Putin could launch a vindictive nuclear strike 'to cause misery and destruction in recognition of Russian failure to conquer Ukraine', expert warns - Putin could use nuclear weapons in Ukraine if he feels defeat is imminent, a leading think-tank has warned.

Moscow has prompted fresh concern in recent days over its willingness to deploy the weapons, last week announcing it would move nuclear missiles into Belarus before today commencing exercises with its Yars intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) systems.

In a research paper for the UK's leading foreign policy think tank, Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia expert Keir Giles warned there is a 'non-zero' chance Putin could seek to use nukes in Ukraine.

He wrote: 'A nuclear strike could be ordered if there is no longer any possibility of claiming conventional victory and a powerful destructive attack on Ukraine is perceived as the only means of avoiding admission of a clear defeat.

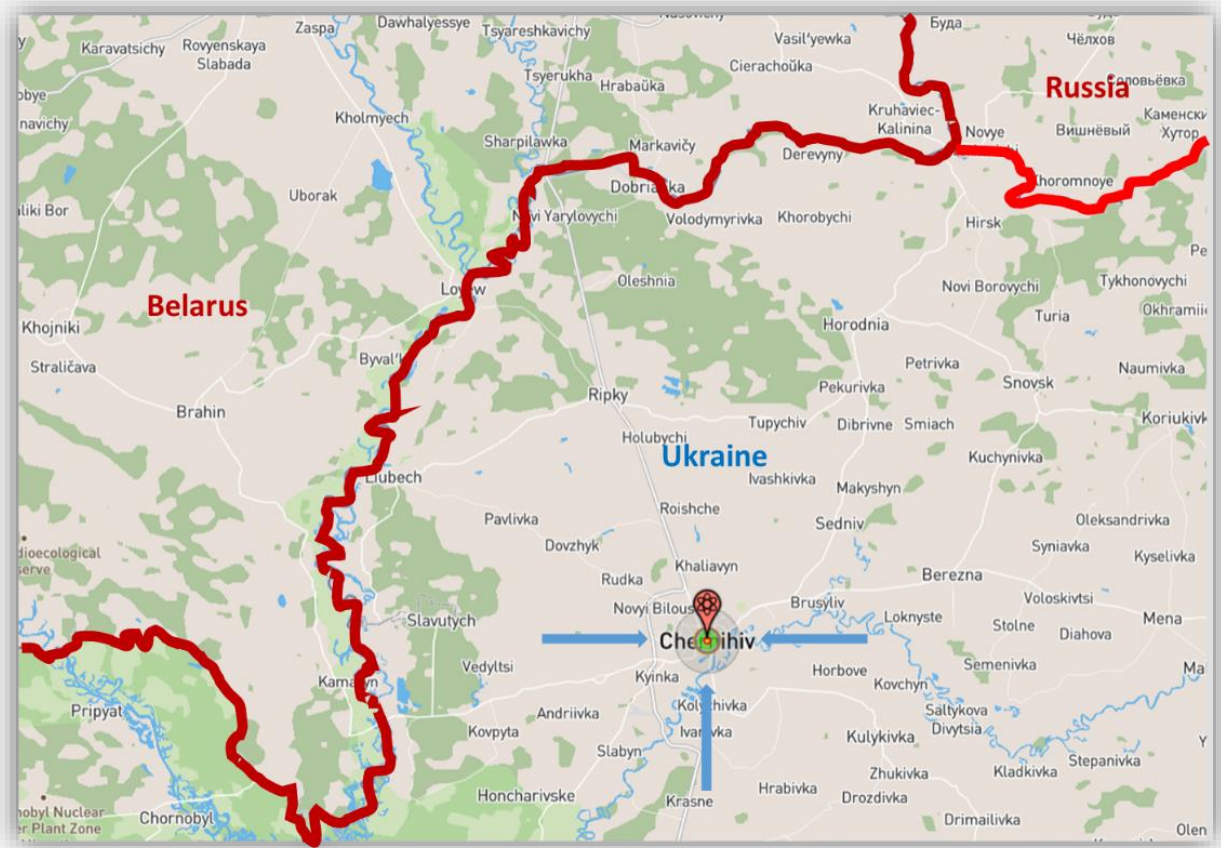
'The moment at which Putin feels his options are exhausted is likely to be the most significantly dangerous decision point,' he concluded.

Giles pointed out that nuclear weapons would have very little military utility on the ground in Ukraine, given that the frontline stretches hundreds of miles and that any strike would not only kill Ukrainians, but also irradiate the land and render it uninhabitable for Russian troops.

Comment - Using the Website “Nukemap,” one can calculate the detonation radius of a nuclear device being exploded.

I calculated a 15-kiloton yield weapon, similar to that used on Hiroshima, and comparable with a tactical application, and detonated it via airburst over the northern Ukrainian city of Chirniiv to come up with the map below.





As can be seen the radius is central to the area around the city itself. When viewing this in a full-scale map, one will see how militarily futile use of such a weapon is.

Immediate impact is confined to a localized circle, and will not provide the Kremlin strategic advantage.

In the world of nuclear weapons, tactical means an exceedingly large amount of explosive energy and strategic means even larger. Most nuclear weapons today are variable-yield, or “dial-a-yield,” providing a set amount of explosive energy that can range from fractions of a kiloton to multiples of a megaton. (For example, the US’s newest version of its B61 nuclear bomb can release 0.3, 1.5, 10 or 50 kilotons of explosive energy. In comparison, the Hiroshima bomb was about 15 kilotons.) Russia has about 4,500 nuclear warheads in its arsenal. Of these, the ones of largest yield—the “strategic” weapons—are deployed on submarines, bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Russia also possesses some 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons kept in storage facilities throughout the country, developed to be used against troops and installations in a small area or in a limited engagement. Such weapons can be launched on the same short-range missiles Russia is currently using to bombard Ukraine, such as its Iskander ballistic missile, which has a range of about 500 kilometers. And these are not the only tactical weapons that could be deployed; the United States has about 100 nuclear “gravity bombs” (with less sophisticated guidance) stationed around Europe. (*Scientific American.*)

The greater fallout from Putin using a nuclear weapon against Ukraine is immense and immediate international negative reaction that will ensue for Russia. Gone will be much of the geopolitical goodwill he has around the world, with even China almost certainly reacting negatively to such deployment, stating as it has done so many times previously that this is totally unacceptable.

China's MoD, in December last year, said the country strictly adheres to a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons “at any time and under any circumstances.”

Words to this effect were included in the post-meeting communique in last week's Putin/Xi conference in Moscow.

Ukraine appears to be trying to capitalize on cracks in China and Russia's alliance after a nuclear snub from Putin - Ukraine's President Zelenskyy has invited Xi Jinping to Ukraine to discuss a peace plan that the Chinese president has proposed to end the war with Russia.

Speaking to AP earlier this week, Zelenskyy said he'd be willing to open discussions with China's leader - a move that could help Ukraine capitalize on the cracks that have appeared in the China-Russia alliance.

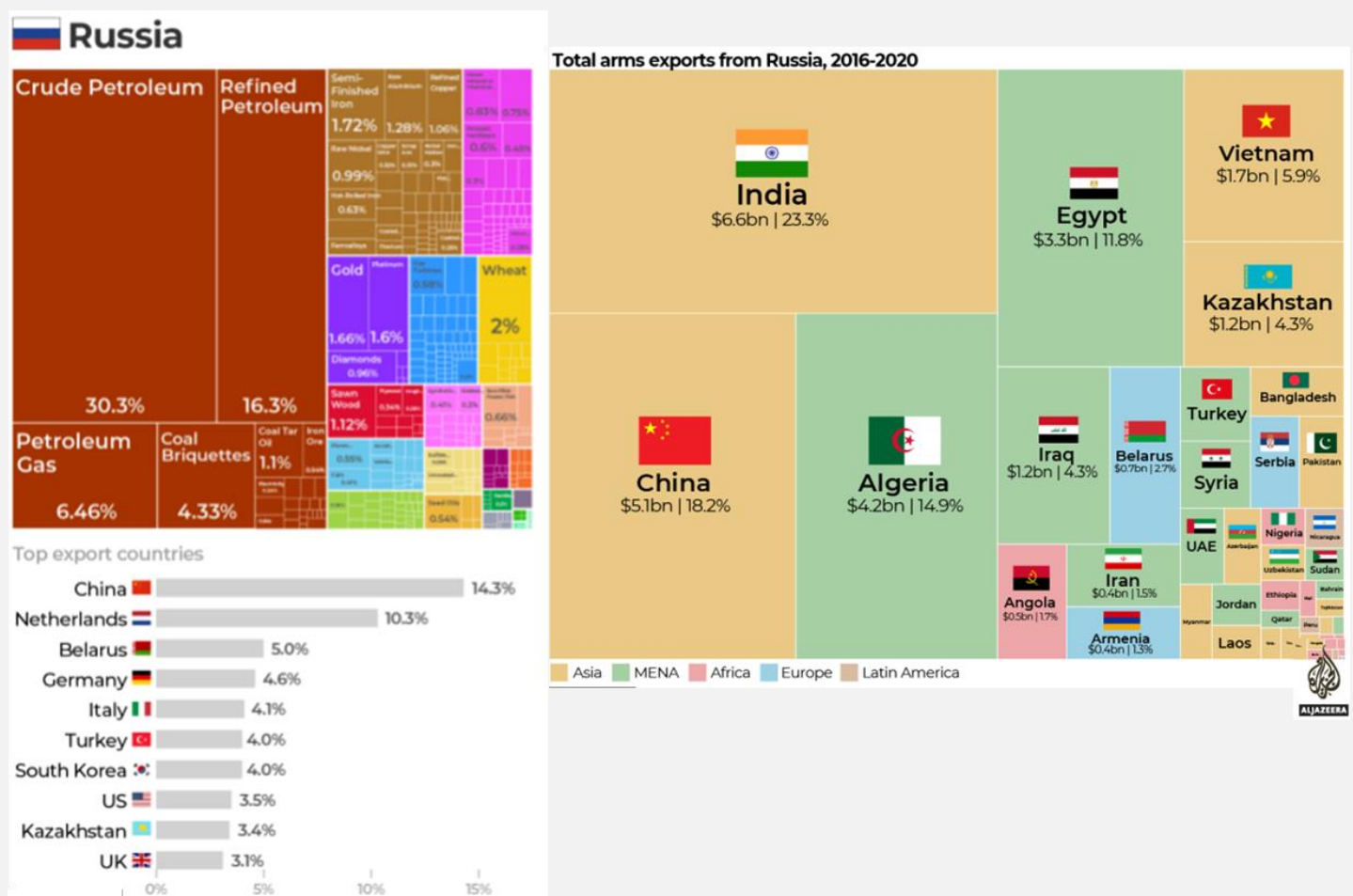
There are signs of tension in the relationship between Russia and China, analysts say, with Xi having secured lucrative trade deals for China at the Moscow summit in return for no additional support for Russia in Ukraine.

Putin last weekend said he planned to station nuclear weapons in neighboring Belarus, breaking an agreement Russia had signed only days before at the summit with China. **(Comment** - Russia breaking an agreement – who would have thought Moscow would be so imprudent!). *(Business Insider earlier today.)*

Sanctions

Russia's economy is starting to come undone – As mentioned in previous Updates, Russia faces reducing inflow of cash and foreign revenue. Articles and information included energy sales dropping and delivery of arms against executed sales agreements not taking place, given the Kremlin is taking whatever production the it can muster, and sending these to Russian frontline forces.

Looking at the al Jazeera tables below, one can clearly see the implications of these dynamics on a Russian cashbook.



Energy exports are down 45% in the early part of this year, with arms exports dropping even more precipitously.

Putin and the Kremlin use revenue, particularly from energy, to prop up Russian Main Street, enabling everyday Russians to see full shelves, travel, and live in a lifestyle they have increasingly become accustomed to since the end of the Soviet Union.

The negative impact of sanctions however, always intended as a long-term negative multiplier, will incrementally see adverse effect on Russian life, industry, and business, progressively eating away at income, state subsidies and spending levels throughout the Federation. This is now looking ever more apparent.

Federally, there are a number of far flung Russian oblasts and provinces totally dependent upon Moscow for funding and subsistence. In return they send their young men and women for enlistment and mobilization, a straight trade, failing which funding dries up.

With the Russian federal cash flow faltering, and provincial recruitment resource pools rapidly dwindling and close to exhaustion, a breaking point for these outer provinces and oblasts is fast approaching.

Putin looks for positives as Russia's consumer demand, industrial output slide - Putin yesterday pointed to record low unemployment and marginally higher real wages as evidence of a gradual economic recovery, although data showed consumer demand and industrial output dropped in February.

Russia's export-dependent economy proved unexpectedly resilient in the face of tough Western sanctions last year, but a return to pre-conflict levels of prosperity may be far off as more government spending is directed towards the military.

Data from the Rosstat federal statistics service showed that unemployment dropped to 3.5% in February, a record low, while real wages, which are adjusted for inflation, rose 0.6% in January.

Retail sales, a key gauge of consumer demand, fell 7.8% y-o-y in February, while industrial output dropped 1.7%.

"Unemployment in Russia remains at a record low level, however this does not mean that all problems on the labour market are already resolved," Putin told a government meeting, mentioning issues around the quality of some jobs and specific regions where unemployment is above average.

Russia's low unemployment is evidence of a labour shortage which has become more pronounced since Putin ordered a partial mobilisation of troops in September that saw hundreds of thousands of mostly young, working-age men called up to the army while others fled the country to avoid being drafted.

The central bank has developed a more hawkish stance this year, warning that Russia's widening budget deficit and the labour shortages pose ongoing inflationary risks.

Putin and other officials have used small rises or only limited falls in economic indicators to extol Russia's resilience in the face of Western sanctions, proudly pointing to a GDP contraction of just 2.1% in 2022 as evidence of this.

By Alexander Marrow in USNews today.

Sovereign defaults jump to record high amid rate hikes, Russia's war on Ukraine, and Covid, Fitch says - Sovereign defaults have jumped exponentially in the last 3 years, according to yesterday's Fitch Ratings report.

Since 2020, 14 such events occurred across nine countries, compared to the prior two-decade span between 2000 and 2019 that saw 19 defaults across 13 different countries.

Currently, Belarus, Lebanon, Ghana, Sri Lanka and Zambia are in default. Other countries that underwent such events since 2020 include Argentina, Ecuador and Suriname, as well as Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Russia faced its own default last year, after Western sanctions limited its ability to pay back investors.

Geopolitics

Britain secures agreement to join Indo-Pacific trade bloc - Britain will be welcomed into an Indo-Pacific trade bloc late today as ministers from the soon-to-be 12-nation trade pact meet in a virtual ceremony.

Chief negotiators and senior officials from member countries agreed yesterday Britain has met the high bar to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, people familiar with the talks told POLITICO.

Negotiations are “done” and Britain’s accession is “all agreed [and] confirmed,” said a diplomat from one member nation. They were granted anonymity as they were unauthorized to discuss deliberations.

The U.K. will be the first new nation to join the pact since it was set up in 2018. Its existing members are Australia, Brunei, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam and Canada.

Beijing will ‘resolutely hit back’ if Taiwanese President Ing-wen meets Speaker Kevin McCarthy - Beijing has warned that it will “resolutely hit back” if a planned meeting between Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy goes ahead during her transit through the United States.

Chinese officials also pressured Tsai over what they said was a plan to use her US transit to seek independence for the self-governing island. The meeting with McCarthy was to take place during Tsai’s expected stopover in Los Angeles.

Why does so much of the Global South support Russia, not Ukraine? - Not everyone is against Putin.

While the West has largely rallied behind Ukraine, pledging to do whatever it takes to help fend off Russian troops, many in the Global South hold a rather different view.

Of course, the Global South is a big place. Attitudes towards the devastating war – now in its 14th month – vary considerably across Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania.

However, opinion polls in places like China, India and Turkey show a clear preference for the war to end now – even if that means Ukraine having to give up territory.

“If you take the global picture, then support for Ukraine’s and the West’s fight against Russia is not completely solid – by a long shot,” said Paul Rogers, Professor of International Security at the University of Bradford.

‘Anti-Americanism’

In the Middle East especially, he claims past military interventions by the US and its allies have created a cynical mood towards the West’s actions in Ukraine.

Yet, rather than translate into support for Russia, which “few countries have at the leadership or public level”, Rogers says the fighting is seen more as a “plague on both houses”.

“It’s not simply seen as good guys in the West versus bad guys in Russia,” he told Euronews. “There are questions that [Moscow’s invasion] is not dissimilar from what Western countries have done.”

More than 929,000 people have been killed in post-9/11 war zones across Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and others, places where western militaries have played a significant role in catastrophic violence.

Experts estimate that many more times that number likely died because of the reverberating effects of war.

'Memories of colonialism'

Deeper, historical issues also impact how the Ukraine war is perceived elsewhere.

"Across much of the Global South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, Russia is not seen as one of the great colonial powers that controlled them for centuries" unlike other European powers, explained Rogers.

"Much of the world just simply isn't aware of the extent of the arms trade, power and corruption you get in Russia."

Although the colonial legacy does not create pro-Russian sentiment – with most people acutely aware of how "grievous" the war has been for Ukrainians – Rogers suggested there was "less sympathy for the Western position."

The legacy of colonialism is highly controversial.

Critics point to the untold atrocities, racism and exploitation committed by Europeans around the world, while defenders claim it brought economic and political development.

Many claim Russia's control over parts of Central Asia and Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, under the USSR amounted to colonialism.

'Russia has a good geopolitical footing'

But the Global South is not only thinking with the heart, it's using the head as well. Though not as much as countries like China, Moscow has forged strong economic and strategic partnerships across much of the world in recent decades.

"Trading ties are important," said Ivan Kłyszcz, an analyst of Russian foreign policy. "Countries like Brazil and India are investing in good relations with Russia because they believe it will help their own international agendas."

Global opinion is very divided when it comes to sanctions on Russia. 45% support the idea that their country should apply the most stringent economic sanctions against Russia while 25% are opposed to it, as per an IPSOS poll.

Many states have abstained from UN resolutions condemning Moscow, instead calling for negotiations.

In October, North Korea, Belarus, Syria and Nicaragua voted against a motion urging Russia to immediately reverse its illegal annexation of four Ukrainian regions, while 19 African countries abstained - including South Africa - along with China, India, Pakistan and Cuba.

"The Global South is driven by a sense of urgency for hostilities to end... so at least there's no fighting and trade can resume as it was a year ago," Kłyszcz told Euronews. "It's an unfortunate reality, but the war is against these country's interests." "They are looking after their own security."

Ordinary people in Africa and the Middle East have been hammered by surging food prices, which hit record highs in 2022 due to the Ukraine war and climate-change induced drought.

Article by Joshua Askew in Euronews.

Comment – Africa was always going to be the final destination for international industry and globalization, coming after China, ASEAN, Central and South America. It has been realized for many a year that at some stage, African labor will be the cheapest and its raw materials increasingly important.

The change has been in the timing, with the Ukrainian invasion by Russia precipitating a quicker approach path.

Russian, Chinese, European, and now American politicians are all beating a rapid path to African leaders' doors, bearing all sort of promises and gifts.

And just like Central Asia, African countries will soon realize the leverage they enjoy in how these relationships settle, some more than others.

The geopolitical genie once again is popping his head out of his bottle.

Containment

Germany boosts military support for Ukraine by €12 billion - German authorities plan to allocate another € 12 billion for military support of Ukraine.

The Budget Committee of the German Bundestag gave the green light on Wednesday for the unbudgeted expenditure, which was requested by the defence ministry and the foreign office.

The additional funding includes 3.2 billion euros to be disbursed in 2023 and credit lines for the period between 2024 and 2032 amounting to some 8.8 billion euros. *Reuters today.*

Some Russian authors, news and web sites are based outside of Russia due to the dangers of criticizing Putin and the Kremlin from within the country itself.

They escaped and are based in surrounding countries such as Latvia, Lithuania and Holland, for example.

Their news coverage is in Russian and I rely on imbedded translation tools, not always accurate.