

Conflict Update # 282

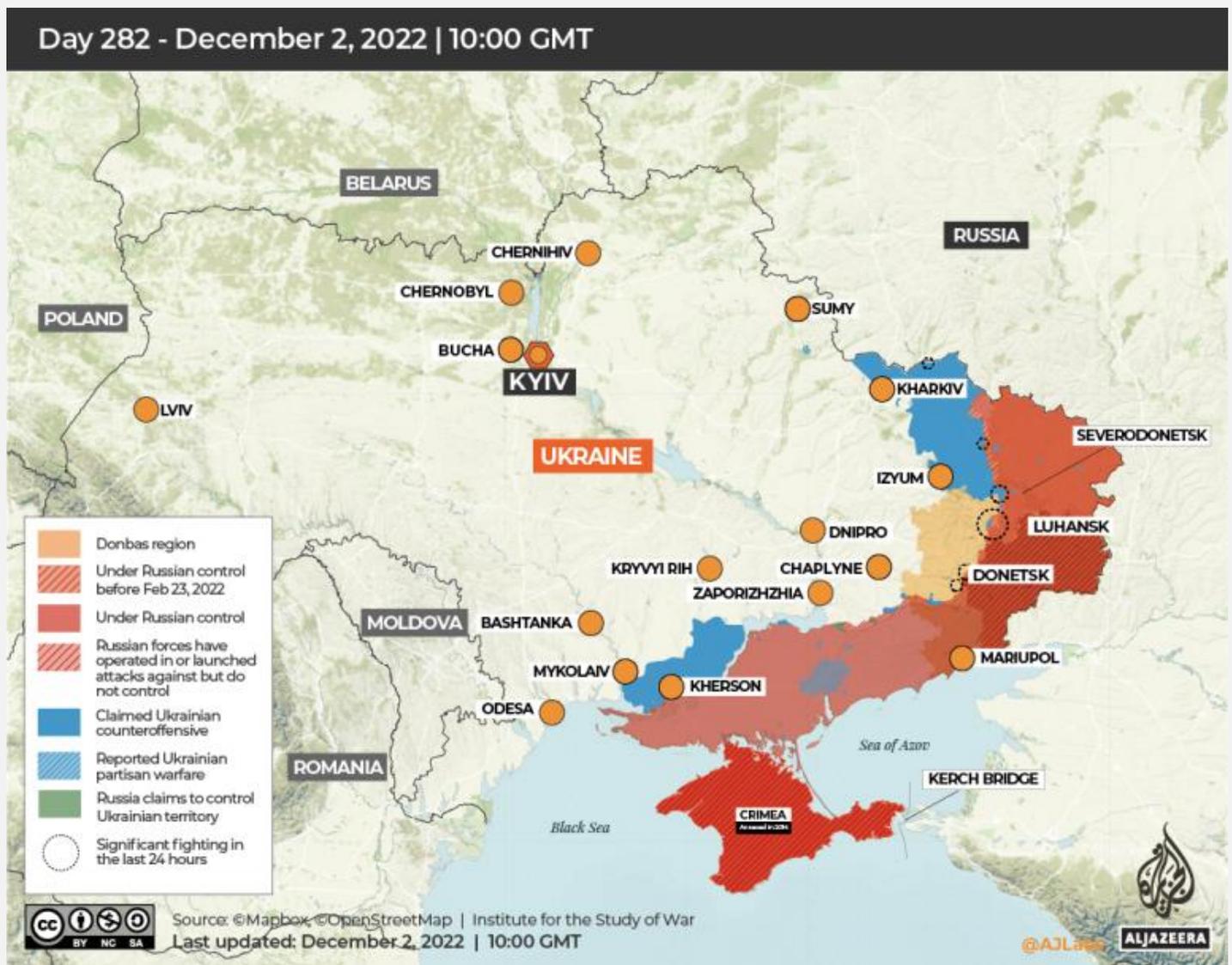
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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 90,090 (650) soldiers killed, 2,916 (+1) enemy tanks, 5,883 (+6) armored combat vehicles, 1,905 (+1) artillery systems, 395 (+0) MLRS systems, 210 (+0) air defense systems, 280 (+0) warplanes, 262 (+1) helicopters, 1,564 (+2) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 531 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,464 (+23) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 76 fuel bowsers (+0) and 163 (+0) units of specialized equipment.

Key Takeaways



OMG – What were we thinking? Russia of late is increasingly rhetorical that NATO and US supplies are not only prolonging the Ukrainian war but also de facto and directly contributing to Ukraine's war efforts.

Why this sudden underlining of Ukrainian Allies' defense contributions?

Because Russia is running out of options and munitions. Now they are crying, as much for internal news consumption as for sending their message that, were it not for these Allied contributions, the war would have been finished already.

Finished already?

And this is where Russia has realized the serious errors of its ways.

They believed, relaying as much to Xi in China in the weeks leading up to their invasion of Ukraine, that the time was right for them to move and reclaim their lands a la Soviet Union days.

They convinced Xi that now was the prime opportunity to pursue their joint new global order.

Their plans were for a very quick takeover of Ukraine – days if not weeks – and installation of a puppet Kremlin-obedient regime led by Viktor Yanukovich (it is believed), ousted former President of Ukraine now resident in Russia.

Once the Ukrainian grab was rapidly settled, Putin would turn to the same tactical takeover of Moldova, immediately to Ukraine's west, and with assistance from the two provinces with majority Russian-speaking populations and where Russia has "peacekeepers" stationed.

Thereafter he would pursue recovering the Baltic countries, Hungary with its semi-friendly leader Viktor Orbán, Romania and the other former Soviet satellite states.

It was to be easy, and Putin would be viewed as a modern "Peter the Great."

But it was not to be.

He miscalculated Ukrainian resolve, very quick NATO and US entry in Ukraine's defense, deep and immediate sanctions, China being barred from providing desperately-needed microchips, intelligence materials and general assistance and, last but not least, devastating financial and international ostracization.

He also utterly misjudged the need for troops, munitions and heavy weaponry. Not only were their "quartermaster" calculations way off because they thought it would only take days to complete and as such supply chains and battle group strengths were not required in great depth, but also he seemed to forget that Ukraine produces much of the componentry for Russian tanks, artillery and missile production. He bombed those factories, mainly centered around Kharkiv, in eastern Ukraine and alongside the Russian border, into oblivion in the first days of the invasion.

They honestly but completely invalidly believed that, with such a rapid and successful takeover, they would be supplied fuel and food by Ukrainian supply points.

Were they ever so wrong – within days Russian soldiers were walking back to Belarus from whence they came, famished and completely disillusioned, tanks and trucks were abandoned by the thousands, fuel bowsers and food trucks were destroyed with abandon by Ukrainian mobile squads, and entire battalions were wiped off the face of the earth.

Putin and his fellow geopolitical thugs were dealt harsh blows, but vitally, stopped in their tracks by a smaller bordering country, providing sufficient time for the US and NATO to gather and begin sending defensive weapons and munitions.

He gravely miscalculated, as did his fellow Kremlin strategists, if one can call them that.

Not only did he now require additional troops to battle a Ukrainian army completely mobilized, outnumbering his forces and routing his divisions wherever they came across them, but also the need for troop depth to cover these devastating frontline losses, and additional training and weapons to arm them for battle.

Land taken in the south and east of Ukraine in the first weeks of the invasion started being de-occupied by Kyiv's counter-offensives, and land taken in 2014 in Crimea and the Donbas became the stated recovery objectives of Ukrainian Command.

Sans a robust military supply and re-supply capability, knee-capped by sanctions and having obliterated their componentry supply chain as mentioned above, Russia was placed in a diabolical war situation, worsening by the week.

Completely outnumbered, he and the Kremlin panicked and legislated a "partial" mobilization, sending ill-prepared and under-armed draftees into the front line like canon-fodder, hoping to buy time to re-stock and rest his troops a la Stalin plugging gaps with untrained and ill-equipped draftees against Germany's Operation Barbarossa on June 22nd, 1941.

When this didn't work he sent in missiles against Ukrainian infrastructure, hoping to drive down Ukrainian morale and a consequent political capitulation.

Although this has caused much mayhem and suffering among Ukrainian civilians, he has not broken them as planned.

And now suddenly, out of options he and his henchmen are thinking **"OMG, What were we thinking?"**

Russian backed authorities in Kherson announce evacuation order - The Russian-imposed administration in Kakhovka said bedridden or physically disabled people would be taken to the Henichesk district to the southeast.

"Take care of yourself and those close to you!" it said in a Telegram post, encouraging people to register for the evacuation.

Russia last month abandoned the west bank, including the city of Kherson, which means the Dnieper River now forms the front line of the war in the south of the country, with both sides exchanging heavy fire from positions on opposite banks.

Authorities are also encouraging people to leave parts of the east bank and promising that those who do so will be well looked after elsewhere.

In another post on Friday, the Kakhovka Telegram channel published what it said was a message from an unnamed evacuee praising the welcome they had received in the Russian coastal town of Anapa.



Russia Is Using The Caspian Sea To Launch Strikes Against Ukraine - On April 23, a Russian missile fired from the Caspian Sea hit the 16-story building where Valeria and her family lived. The fourth and fifth floors of the building collapsed, and the house caught fire. Twenty people were injured and eight died. The rocket claimed the lives of three

generations of the family living on the fourth floor: Valeria; her 3-month-old daughter, Kira; and Valeria's mother, Lyudmyla Yavkina.

It was one of the first deaths reported outside of the Ukraine combat zone. At that time, the fighting was largely focused in the Kherson, Zaporizhzhya, and Mykolayiv regions, hundreds of kilometers east of Odesa. But Russia continued to shell civilian targets far from the combat zone.



On May 3, Tu-95 strategic bombers launched high-precision missiles from the Caspian Sea at infrastructure targets in the Lviv, Dnepropetrovsk, Kropyvnytskyi, Vinnytsya, Kyiv, and Zakarpattya regions. In the west and in the center of the country, there were explosions on the railways; the trains stopped running. In a number of regions, generating facilities failed and residents were left without electricity.

On June 26, Russia fired six X-101 high-precision missiles in the direction of Kyiv from the Caspian Sea. The Ukrainian air-defense system shot down several missiles, but one hit a residential building in Kyiv, killing one person and injuring five others.

Russia continued to launch missiles from the Caspian Sea in July, August, and September. In October and November, the Russian military stepped up its missile strikes following retreats in the south and east after setbacks at the front.

Missiles fired by Moscow -- Russia launched missiles from missile-carrying aircraft in the Caspian Sea, ships in the Black Sea, and in the Rostov region -- disabled energy and water facilities across Ukraine, leaving millions of people without water and electricity. On October 10, the Russian Defense Ministry said that missile strikes on military installations and power systems had "hit the target."

After Moscow launched missiles from the Caspian on June 30, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry issued an appeal in which it called on Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan "to make every effort to force Russia to adhere to its international legal obligations, in particular the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea."

The sixth Caspian summit had been held in Ashgabat on the day before the Ukrainian appeal, with the participation of the leaders of Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. According to the communiqué adopted on June 29, the coastal states reaffirmed the principle of using the Caspian Sea for peaceful purposes.

None of the leaders attending the meeting raised the issue of Russia's use of the Caspian for military purposes.

But the main reason the Caspian states have remained silent about the missile launches is their dependence on Russia, analysts say. The Caspian states are members of alliances led by Russia.

In an interview with The Economist, Vadym Skibitskiy, Ukraine's deputy head of military intelligence, said that Iranian missiles would be delivered by air to Russian-occupied Crimea and by sea to Russian ports on the Caspian Sea. The Economist predicted that, after receiving these missiles, Russia will step up its air strikes.

Ukrainian embassies around Europe receive packages containing animals' eyes - A Ukrainian official said Ukrainian embassies and consulates in six European countries recently received packages containing animals' eyes.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Oleh Nikolenko wrote on Facebook that the "bloody parcels" were received by the Ukrainian embassies in Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Croatia and Italy, and by consulates in Naples, Italy; Krakow, Poland and the Czech city of Brno. He said that "we are studying the meaning of this message."

Nikolenko said they arrived after a package containing an explosive device sent to the Ukrainian Embassy in Madrid on Wednesday that injured an employee.

Nikolenko quoted Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba as saying, "We have reason to believe that a well-planned campaign of terror and intimidation of Ukrainian embassies and consulates is taking place."

Putin told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that further attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure are "inevitable."

Russia suffering 'colossal' military losses in intense battle - Russia's attempts to capture an embattled city in eastern Ukraine have resulted in "colossal" losses for President Vladimir Putin's army, according to a top Ukrainian defense official.

Yuriy Sak, an adviser to Ukraine's minister of defense, told CNBC Wednesday that the city, Bakhmut in the Donetsk region, was "undoubtedly one of the key hotspots at the moment" in the ongoing war.

His assertion that Russia was facing major military losses, as well as other assessments, seems to undercut recent claims from a Russian-installed leader in Donetsk that Bakhmut could soon be within Russia's grasp.

Denis Pushilin said on Russian television Monday that Russian forces were close to encircling Bakhmut, CNN reported. Pushilin did note that the situation in the city "remains difficult" but said Russian units were advancing regardless.

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW), a U.S. think tank, said in an assessment earlier this week that recent Russian advancements around Bakhmut do not mean that Russia will be able to fully seize it anytime soon.

"Russian troops, in their current degraded state, are likely unable to be able to accomplish this task quickly," the ISW said in a report released Monday.

In the newest ISW assessment for Wednesday, the think tank wrote that Russia's monthslong efforts to advance on Bakhmut, during which it has expended combat strength on small settlements around the city, "have resulted in the continued attrition of Russian manpower and equipment, pinning troops on relatively insignificant settlements for weeks and months at a time."

Even if Russia continues to advance on Bakhmut after making some marginal gains and ultimately forces Ukraine to withdraw, capturing the city offers Putin's forces "little operational benefit," the ISW said.

"The costs associated with six months of brutal, grinding, and attrition-based combat around Bakhmut far outweigh any operational advantage that the Russians can obtain from taking Bakhmut," the ISW wrote.

"Russian offensives around Bakhmut, on the other hand, are consuming a significant proportion of Russia's available combat power, potentially facilitating continued Ukrainian counteroffensives elsewhere," the think tank added.

Ukrainian casualties - About 13,000 Ukrainian troops have been killed since Russia's invasion in February, a senior adviser to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said.

"We have official estimates from the General Staff ... And they range from 10,000 ... to 13,000 dead," Mykhailo Podolyak told Ukraine's Channel 24 on Thursday.

Zelenskyy would make the official data public "when the right moment comes," he added.

Belarusians at Kyiv's gates? - A report in Ukrinform suggests that "Russian military intelligence may attempt in coming days to pursue a scenario involving either an assassination attempt targeting Belarus President Lukashenko or its imitation, with the aim of ultimately intimidating the latter and prompting him to finally order his troops to directly engage in the war on Ukraine, alongside Russian troops."

Either way, the Belarusian forest may offer Putin one of his last courses of action to save his war in Ukraine. But is Belarus really an option for Putin? Given the humiliating withdrawal of Russian soldiers from Kherson last month, Putin is left with only a few bad options: Return to pre-Feb. 24 battle positions. Negotiate a ceasefire. Resume the offensive and conduct a second assault on Kyiv from Belarus. Or negotiate a peace deal with Kyiv and withdraw entirely from Ukraine, including Crimea.

Zelenskyy will not consider any peace settlement failing to include Crimea. Putin, likely, could not withstand — let alone survive — the capitulation of Crimea to Kyiv, thereby ruling out this course of action. Between a return to their pre-Feb. 24 positions and a second assault on Kyiv, the former is the more likely course of action.

Putin's best course of action would be a Korean War armistice-like end state — a perpetual "frozen conflict" that allows him to maintain control of Crimea. But that simply is not in his DNA, nor would it be accepted by Russian political strategist Alexander Dugin, TV anchor Vladimir Solovyov, oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, siloviki factions or milbloggers. Forced to survive in a win-at-all-cost environment, Putin's pushing Belarus into war might be his only remaining option — and, significantly, most of the military pieces necessary are already in place.

Putin needs Belarusians at the gates of Kyiv, and fast — as in yesterday fast. Retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, former commanding general of United States Army Europe, noted in an interview with The Economist, Ukraine likely has achieved "irreversible momentum" in its war against Russia and that Crimea could be recaptured by Kyiv in 2023.

Lukashenko's day of reckoning has come and if he decides to not join Putin, it is possible he could be ousted in a Russian-backed coup — or perhaps poisoned with a dose of toad venom of his own.

To prevail in Ukraine, Moscow needs Belarus. The Kremlin needs training areas, logistical hubs, rail networks, military hardware, and equipment to outfit their military. Sooner than later, Putin will come for Belarus's trained soldiers as well, and Lukashenko knows it. These two militaries have trained together; they share doctrine and equipment and speak the same language. To meet the potential demand, according to UGS, "the military commissariat of Belarus's Brest Oblast has issued a call for tenders to print 50,000 call-up notices before 31 December."

Humanitarian

Russian attacks seek 'erasure' of Ukrainian culture - Russian troops in Ukraine are deliberately attacking the country's museums, libraries and other cultural institutions, according to a report issued by the US and Ukrainian chapters of the international writers' organization PEN International.

"Culture is not collateral damage in the war against Ukraine; it's a target, a central pillar of Russian President Vladimir Putin's justification for the war," the report stated.

“Putin has repeatedly claimed that Ukrainian culture and language simply don’t exist. By targeting art museums, music halls, libraries, theatres and historical sites, he attempts to make it so.”

PEN International cited Ukraine’s culture ministry as saying that 529 “cultural heritage and cultural institutions” have been destroyed or damaged since the war started on February 24. The figure includes both sites of national importance and cultural venues in towns and villages, the report said.

Putin

Putin open to negotiations for Russia’s interests - The Kremlin says Putin is open to negotiations to secure Russia’s interests, but a mutual basis for talks is difficult as the US does not recognize its “new territories.”

US President Biden said yesterday he was prepared to speak to Putin if he was looking for a way to end the war.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters when asked about Biden’s remarks, “The president of the Russian Federation has always been, is and remains open to negotiations in order to ensure our interests.

“The most preferable way to achieve our interests is through peaceful, diplomatic means,” Peskov said.

“Putin was, is and remains open to contacts and negotiations.”

Russia illegally annexed four regions in Ukraine in September after a referendum in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia that the West and Ukraine denounced as a “sham.”

US poses existential threat to Russia, says Putin’s leading diplomat - Putin’s top diplomat claimed the US posed an existential threat to Russia through its support for Ukraine.

Sergei Lavrov, the Kremlin’s foreign minister who has a reputation for wild statements, used a press conference on Thursday to condemn Washington and Nato, while defending Russia’s bombing of Ukraine’s civil infrastructure.

He said the Kremlin’s assault on the Ukrainian power grid was aimed at cutting off the country’s supply of western arms, countering the view held by Kyiv and allies that knocking out heat and electricity for ordinary citizens was an attempt to break the national spirit.

His remarks came hours after Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky said around 6 million Ukrainians were facing winter without power due to a two-month long series of strikes on power plant, substations and transmission lines, among other key energy infrastructure.

On Wednesday night, the governor of Kherson said the region’s recently liberated capital city had lost power after heavy shelling from Russian forces.

The West has been feeding Ukraine weapons throughout the war, lately turning towards the supply of air defence systems to counter the Russian strikes which have rained on cities all over the country, far from the front lines of the war in the south and east.

Comment – Lavrov’s statement provides confirmation about Russian consciousness of guilt in attacking civilian infrastructure and thus culpable for war crimes, actions such as these being included in the definition of such crimes.

Simply put, consciousness of guilt is an action or statement that a person accused of a crime makes that an innocent person would not make.

Putin's regime will collapse if he loses this key territory, according to Crimean leader - There is a lot at stake for Putin as the war he started has not been going his way. Over the past nine months, Russia has lost swaths of

Ukrainian land including some that it recently annexed including the city of Kherson, resulting in many embarrassing defeats for the Kremlin.

Reports now suggest Ukraine is preparing a far-reaching offensive to take back every part of its country including the Crimean region which it lost back in 2014.

In August during the 'Crimea Platform Conference,' Zelenskyy vowed his country's determination to take back the Crimean Peninsula which he said was illegally annexed from Russia.

In doing so he said Ukraine would resort to any means it deems necessary, and it would not consult any other country before doing so, DW reports.

'It is necessary to liberate Crimea. This will be the resuscitation of world law and order.'

According to LRT, in September, retired US General Ben Hodges predicted that the Ukrainian military would push for the liberation of Crimea by mid-January, and likely succeed in taking back all other Russian-occupied territories by the summer of 2023.

Albeit Western officials openly regard Crimea as Ukrainian, behind closed doors they fear retaking it is a completely difficult ordeal than merely firing missiles into Russian-held positions there which Ukraine has done recently.

Vladimir Putin fell down stairs at his home and soiled himself - Putin has fallen down stairs at his official residence and soiled himself while continuing to suffer from cancer, a Telegram channel which claims links to his bodyguards has suggested.

The 70-year-old Russian leader, whose health has visibly deteriorated since he launched his war in Ukraine, suffered the fall on Wednesday evening when he slipped coming down stairs at his Moscow home, channel General SVR claims.

Putin landed on his coccyx, fell down five steps, then rolled on to his side and slid down two more. The sharp impact caused him to 'involuntarily defecate' due to 'cancer of the gastrointestinal tract', according to the channel.

General SVR has posted updates about Putin's health since the start of the war, though has provided no evidence to support its claims or proof that it does indeed have connections within his guards.

In the latest post, the channel wrote that Putin 'stumbled and fell to his back, after which he fell on his side and slid down a couple of steps.

'The incident took place in front of the president's bodyguards, who reacted quickly and rushed to Putin's aid.

'Three security officers helped the president to get to the nearest sofa and called the doctors who are on duty at the residence.'

The channel said that medics 'arrived within a few minutes but could not immediately examine the president'.

This was due to him suffering 'oncology of the gastrointestinal tract, as a result of which he already experiences serious problems with digestion' - and the fall caused an 'involuntary defecation'.

Deaths back home leave Russians furious with Putin - Russians are being plunged into a bleak winter where power outages and heating failures are already freezing people to death while President Vladimir Putin is choosing to spend hundreds of billions of dollars prosecuting an illegal war in Ukraine instead of helping his own citizens.

In many of the remote regions where conditions are at their worst, people are also being forced to contribute the most to the war via conscription drives that strip healthy young men out of the local workforce and send them to their deaths on the front line.

“They take young men—the only breadwinners—away and send them back in coffins. The guys freeze on the front, get sick, die while their families live in poverty,” Valentina Melnikova, a prominent advocate from the Soldiers’ Mothers Committee, told The Daily Beast. “It seems authorities have no interest left in human lives at this point.”

While Russian missile attacks leave Ukraine without water, heating and power, Russia’s own cities—in Siberia, the Altai Mountains, Baikal and Kamchatka—are freezing without central heating.

Impacts

Bill on labelling Russia’s PMC Wagner mercenary group as terrorist organization submitted to US Congress - Two US senators have drafted a bill which requires the US State Department to brand PMC Wagner, the Russian mercenary group, as a foreign terrorist organization. The bill was submitted by Roger Wicker (Republican, Mississippi) and Ben Cardin (Democrat, Maryland), says the announcement made on Wicker’s website.

The US House of Representatives will also consider a similar proposal tabled by Democrats Steve Cohen and Marc Veasey as well as Republicans Joe Wilson and Richard Hudson.

Putin and his cronies will stop at nothing to accomplish their objectives, including employing mercenaries like the Wagner Group to commit atrocities on their behalf,” noted Senator Wicker.

The bill also contains provisions to designate any structures affiliated with PMC Wagner or its successor entities as foreign terrorist organisations.

“As Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine enters its ninth month, the United States must continue to remove the tools of destruction at its disposal,” Senator Cardin said.

By recognizing an organization as terrorist, the US gain instruments to prosecute its members and track its international assets all over the world.

Containment

Ukraine receives first HAWK air defence system from Spain - Ukraine has received its first delivery of a HAWK air defence system from Spain, Ukrainian defence minister Oleksii Reznikov said after a meeting with his Spanish counterpart Margarita Robles in Odesa.

More HAWK anti-aircraft equipment from Spanish stocks are to follow, and Ukrainian soldiers are already being trained on the system in Spain.

This medium-range air defence system, which originated in the United States, entered service in the early 1960s and has been repeatedly modernized.



An often overlooked Swedish fighter may be the jet Ukraine needs to take on Russia now, experts say - As Russia's beleaguered air force continues to launch attacks in Ukraine, Kyiv finds itself in need of air assets, including new fighter aircraft.

The best jet for Ukraine is the Gripen, a 4.5th-generation multirole fighter jet built by Sweden's SAAB, and which is "by far the most suitable candidate in terms of operational requirements," according to Justin Bronk, Nick Reynolds, and Jack Watling of the Royal United Services Institute, a British think tank.

Ukraine needs a fighter with missiles that offer "the greatest possible effective range under low-altitude, subsonic launch conditions" in order to bypass Russian air defenses, including its S-400 missile system, which can target Ukrainian jets at higher altitudes, the three experts said in a recent report.

The Gripen can carry the Meteor air-to-air missile, which is effective in those conditions thanks to its ramjet design and has a 100 km range, allowing it to be fired from safer distances. The jet can also be outfitted with anti-ship missiles.



US planning to send several NASAMS air-defence systems stationed in Middle East to Ukraine – America and its allies are in talks with unspecified Middle Eastern countries regarding a potential redeployment of some NASAMS middle-range air-defence systems from their territories to Ukraine, Raytheon CEO Greg Hayes said in an interview with Politico.

"There are NASAMS deployed across the Middle East, and some of our NATO allies and we [the U.S.] are actually working with a couple of Middle Eastern countries that currently employ NASAMS and trying to direct those back up to Ukraine," Hayes noted.

According to him, the NASAMS systems are expected to be delivered to Ukraine in 3-6 months, while the US will deploy new ones to the Middle Eastern countries within 2 years. Hayes did not disclose which countries are involved in the decision-making. According to Politico, Oman and Qatar purchased NASAMS systems.

It is quicker to redeploy the systems to Ukraine than to produce them in the US which takes over 2 years due to the time required to buy electronic components and missile engines, Hayes adds.

Hungary will continue to oppose Ukraine aid package: PM - Hungary's prime minister says he will continue to oppose an EU plan to provide an 18 billion euros (\$19bn) aid package to Ukraine in 2023.

In an interview on state radio, PM Orban acknowledged that Ukraine needs help to pay for the functioning of essential services but emphasized that he would block the EU's plan of joint borrowing to fund the package.

"The question is how to help Ukraine," Orban said.

"One proposal says that we should use the budgets of the EU member states to take out new loans together and use that money to give to Ukraine. We are not in favor of this because we do not want the EU to become a community of indebted states instead of a community of cooperating member states."

Orban instead proposed that EU member states draw from their own budget to provide assistance to Ukraine through bilateral agreements.

"We will not accept the other plan, we will not consent to it, without us it will not come into being," he said.

Peace Talks

Kremlin Rejects Biden Terms For Ukraine Talks - The Kremlin earlier today rejected US President Joe Biden's terms for Ukraine talks with Russian leader Vladimir Putin, saying Moscow's offensive will continue.

"What did President Biden say in fact? He said that negotiations are possible only after Putin leaves Ukraine," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, adding Moscow was "certainly" not ready to accept those conditions.

"The special military operation is continuing," Peskov said, using the Kremlin term for the assault on Ukraine.

Comment – President Biden calling for Russia to enter negotiations, and knowing they will reject such a move, may well be preparing the ground for some future declaration against Russia. That the west has tried, and they are unwilling to engage, paving the way for other actions by the west.

Western calls to withdraw dampen chance for negotiations, says Russia - Russia says the West's demands that it should pull out completely from Ukraine as part of any talks to end the war effectively rule out negotiations.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated that Russian President Vladimir Putin remains open to talks, but the Western demand that Moscow first withdraws its troops from Ukraine is unacceptable.

Peskov's comments came as Putin spoke on the phone on Friday morning with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Scholz's office said he made clear to Putin "that there must be a diplomatic solution as quickly as possible, which includes a withdrawal of Russian troops."

War Crimes

UN investigating whether attacks on infrastructure amount to war crimes - UN-appointed investigators are investigating whether Russia's attacks on critical infrastructure in Ukraine amount to war crimes.

Russia has been heavily targeting Ukraine's electricity infrastructure since early October, causing blackouts and leaving millions without heating as temperatures plummet.

Russia says the assaults are not aimed at civilians and are meant to reduce Ukraine's ability to fight and push it to negotiate – though Kyiv says such attacks are a war crime.

"Part of the analysis that we are engaged in at present ... is whether the attacks constitute war crimes," Pablo de Greiff told a news conference, speaking from Kyiv.

If they do, the team will work out what it "can do in order to make a contribution to the accountability for such crimes," he added.

Moscow 'outraged' by France backing war crimes tribunal - Russia's foreign ministry said it was "outraged" by a statement from the French foreign ministry that supported plans to create a possible war crimes tribunal.

In a statement, Moscow's foreign ministry said, "We demand that French diplomats, who are so attentive to human rights issues, not divide people into 'right' and 'wrong,' 'ours' and 'not ours'."

Ukraine has been pushing to create a special tribunal to prosecute Russian military and political leaders it holds responsible for starting the war.

Russia, which calls its actions in Ukraine a "special military operation," has denied targeting civilians and other war crimes.

Sanctions

EU nations agree to cap Russian gas prices - European Union countries have reached an agreement to cap the price of Russian seaborne oil exports at \$60 a barrel. Poland, the only holdout in the 27-member bloc, agreed to the deal, paving the way for it to be formally approved by the EU over the weekend.

The price limit, which was agreed to by ambassadors of EU countries in Brussels, is linked to a previous decision by the G7 group of leading economies aimed at reducing Russia's income from selling oil, while also preventing a spike in international oil prices.

Under the cap, providing certain services for Russian oil shipments, including insurance, financing and technical assistance, is to be prohibited if the oil is sold above the \$60 threshold.

US adds Russia's Wagner Group to religious freedoms blacklist - The US has added Russia's mercenary Wagner Group to its religious freedoms blacklist.

"Around the world, governments and non-state actors harass, threaten, jail, and even kill individuals on account of their beliefs. In some instances, they stifle individuals' freedom of religion or belief to exploit opportunities for political gain," US Secretary of State Blinken said in a statement announcing the designations.

"These actions sow division, undermine economic security, and threaten political stability and peace. The US will not stand by in the face of these abuses," he added.