

Conflict Update # 324

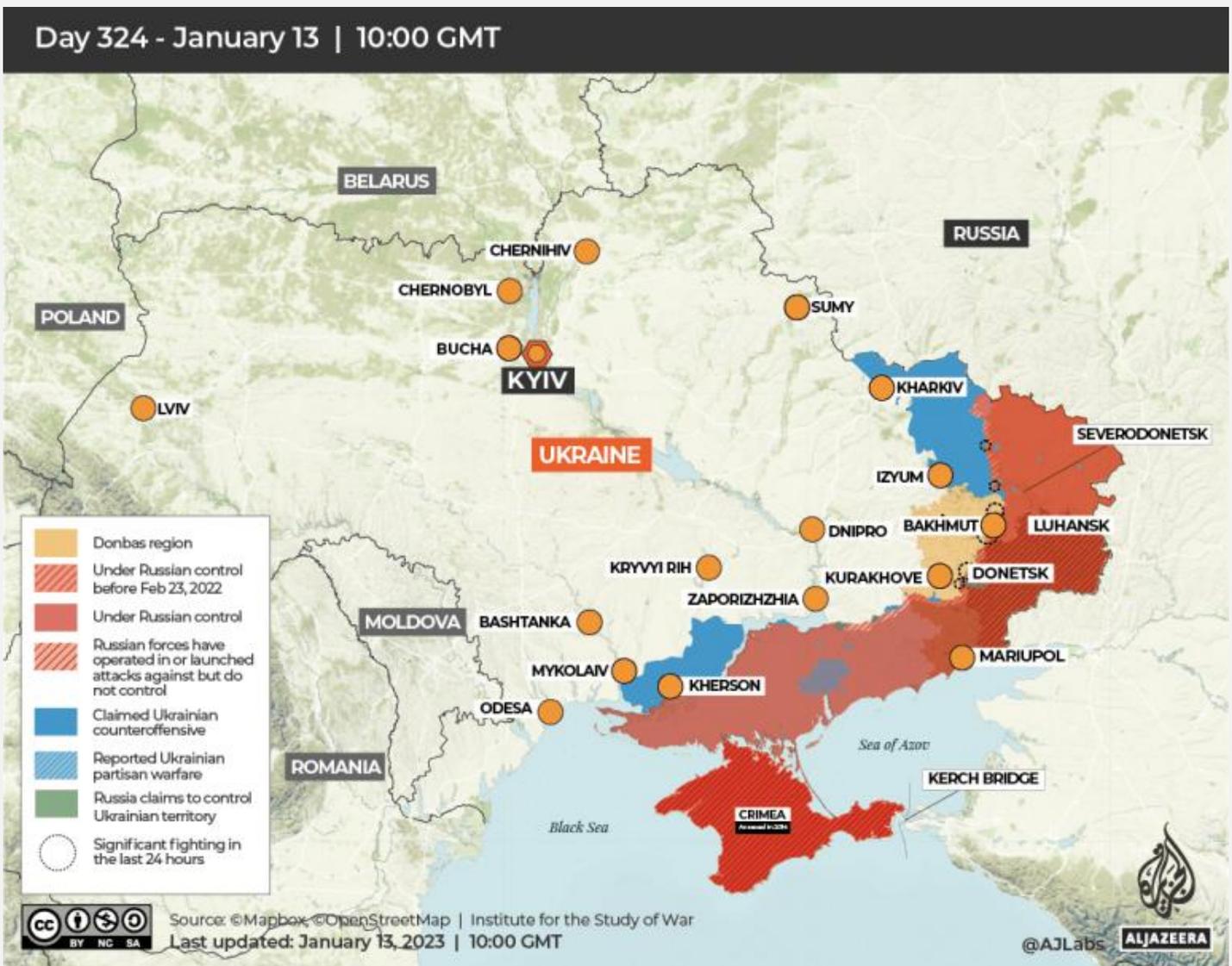
January 13th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

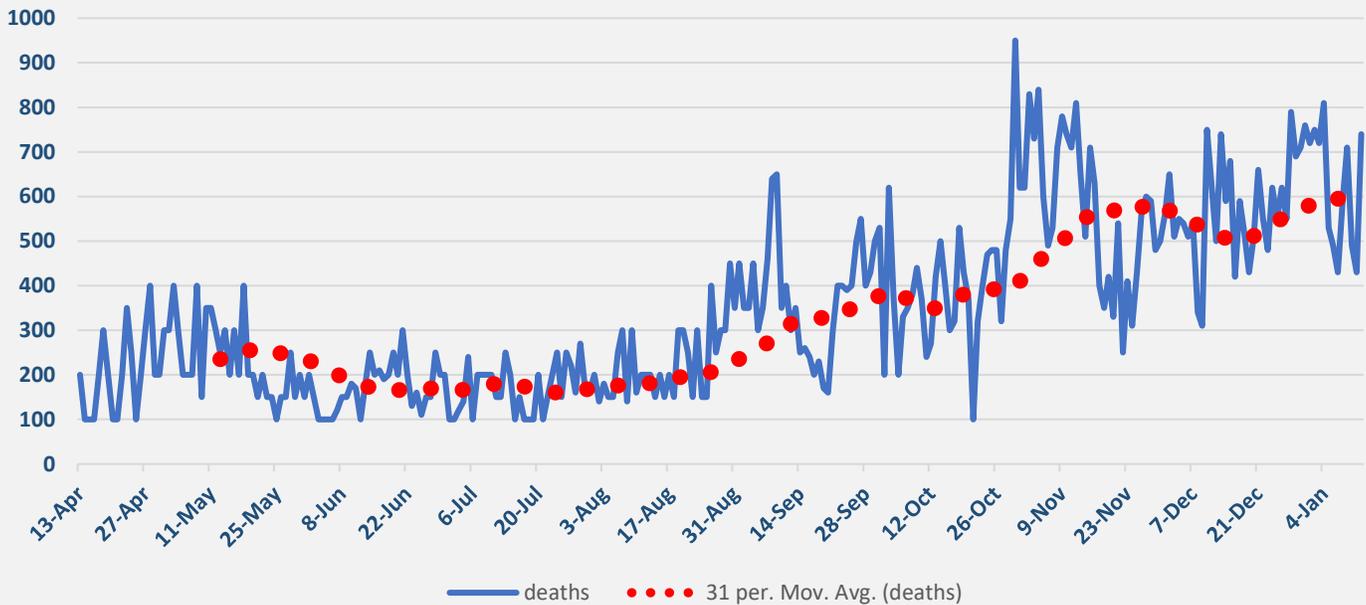
Russian losses – 114,130 (740) soldiers killed, 3,098 (+4) enemy tanks, 6,167 (+8) armored combat vehicles, 2,086 (+4) artillery systems, 437 (+0) MLRS systems, 218 (+0) air defense systems, 286 (+1) warplanes, 276 (+0) helicopters, 1,865 (+0) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 723 (+0) cruise missiles, 17 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,833 (+7) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 184 (+0) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Ukraine says its troops are holding in the east around Soledar and Bakhmut. Moscow says it has captured Soledar.

Russian troop deaths by day



What does Russia’s military shake-up mean for the war in Ukraine? - The appointment of Russia’s most senior general, Valery Gerasimov, signals Moscow’s failing military effort and fraught domestic politics, analysts say.

Russia’s new top general has visited front lines in Ukraine only once during Moscow’s nearly year-long invasion, in May.

And according to some reports, Valery Gerasimov, the man now in charge of troubleshooting the dragging conflict, objected to the war before it began.

The 67-year-old chief of the General Staff and now Russia’s most senior general has been at the helm of what the Kremlin dubs a “special military operation” in Ukraine since Wednesday, replacing Sergey Surovikin, who held the role for just three months and oversaw the massive shelling of energy infrastructure and civilian sites in Ukraine.

“Gerasimov didn’t plan and categorically Ukraine’s deputy defence minister and

rejected [the war],” said Anatoly Lopata, who served as chief of the General Staff in the 1990s.

His alleged resistance contradicted the Shoigu, who was among a tiny circle that caught most of the Kremlin by

opinion of his boss, defence minister Sergei of top officials who planned the invasion surprise.

But despite his objections, top brass opposed to the war

Gerasimov and the rest of Russia’s embraced it in the end.

“Gerasimov didn’t quit, didn’t war,” Pavel Luzin, a defence think-tank told Al Jazeera.

shoot himself – so, he accepted the analyst with the Jamestown Foundation

The military shake-up followed Ukraine and comes amid a plummeting temperatures freeze the sludgy ground and make the movement of tanks and other armored vehicles possible.

months of setbacks for Russian troops in resumption of hostilities, as plummeting temperatures freeze the sludgy ground and make the movement of tanks and other armored vehicles possible.

According to Nikolay Mitrokhin, a historian at Germany’s Bremen University, the reshuffle signalled Moscow’s failure to organize a new offensive on Kyiv and northern Ukraine.



“It became finally clear that Russia failed its own plans to start a massive offensive in January,” he told Al Jazeera.

Military and defence contractors could not provide enough equipment, and top officials have been touring military plants and threatening their managers, he said.

And despite months-long attempts and heavy losses, Russian forces failed to take the eastern city of Bakhmut and switched to nearby Soledar, the salt-mining town with a pre-war population of 10,000 which they did ultimately claim to have captured late on Thursday.

The demoted general, Surovikin, struggled to manage the deployment of tens of thousands of newly mobilised and largely untrained Russian men.

Putin's choice for new Ukraine commander is all about closing ranks at home and the choice of Gerasimov to replace Surovikin is a political defeat for Wagner Group boss Prigozhin and Chechen strongman Kadyrov — and a sign that Putin may be getting skittish on the home front.

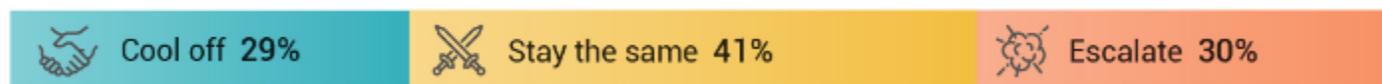
He has once again replaced his supreme military commander in Ukraine, just three months after a previous change at the top. The announcement Wednesday is clearly a sign of Putin's disappointment in the direction of the war – but perhaps more notably, a major political victory for the military establishment over outsiders who had been trying to gain influence.

Russia and Ukraine's militaries both claim to hold the embattled eastern city of Soledar, about six miles from the Donetsk city of Bakhmut, which has seen fierce fighting since at least May. Moscow's defense ministry claims to have "liberated" Soledar on Thursday evening using "air, missile, and artillery strikes," followed by paratroopers who swept in thanks to a "stealth maneuver" to claim the territory, according to Lieutenant-General Igor Konashenkov.

Ukraine's military, however, described the action around Soledar as "hot," and said battles there are ongoing. "The enemy threw almost all the main forces in the direction of Donetsk and maintains a high intensity of the offensive," said Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar, writing early Friday on Telegram. "Our fighters are valiantly trying to hold the defense," she said, calling this "a difficult phase of the war, but we will win."

Ukraine's president says his military is now prioritizing "modern tanks and effective artillery...to drive the Russian army out of our land," he said Friday to an audience of Lithuanian lawmakers. "And we need an international tribunal, which will bring to justice those whose evil minds gave birth to this crime, this war," he said. "When the revanchists from present-day Moscow will face a fair trial, it will be a historic punishment for those revanchists who tried to break our freedom a generation ago."

Will the conflict between Russia and Ukraine escalate in 2023?



Russia has bombed Soledar 91 times since Wagner 'liberation' - Russia continues to launch attacks on Soledar, according to Ukrainian media. Recent reports from Ukraine say Russia has bombed the area 91 times since the Wagner Group claimed "liberation" of the Ukrainian town.

The Russia-Ukraine war has been ongoing for nearly a year, since February 2022, and recently, Russia has refocused its efforts in the Bakhmut and Soledar regions in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk oblast.

According to a Reuters report, the Wagner Group—a private military group from Russia—claimed "liberation" of Soledar on Wednesday, an effort that the Wagner Group claimed killed 500 pro-Ukrainian soldiers. Since the announcement, Russian attacks have reportedly continued against the town.

Comment – The question thus is “Why is Russia bombing a town it has captured?” – because it hasn’t.

Ukrainian hospitals overflowing with Soledar troops, claims Russian officer - Hospitals in Ukraine are full of troops who have been wounded in the bitter fight for a town in the Donetsk oblast, according to a Russian commander.

Vladimir Novikov told Tass that hospitals in the neighboring oblasts of Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk "are really packed with the wounded, mostly from Soledar."

The Russian state news agency reported how he had said the Ukrainian army had suffered "huge losses" in the town located nine miles north of Bakhmut. He said Kyiv had sent its "most capable forces there," such as the 128th Mountain Assault Brigade.

Freedom Prize - Lithuania has presented Ukrainian President Zelenskyy with the 2022 Freedom Prize at a ceremony hosted by the Lithuanian parliament.

Wagner Group reportedly using ordinary freight trucks to transport dead soldiers back to Russia - The Wagner Group has been using ordinary freight trucks to transport the bodies of its dead soldiers back to Russia from the battlefield in Ukraine, a popular Russian Telegram channel reported on Thursday.

Disavtotrans, a company based in Russia’s Rostov region, reportedly serves as an intermediary for the transportation orders, which appear “practically every day.”

The Telegram channel’s report mentioned one case in which the Wagner Group offered to pay 60,000 rubles (about \$885) for a set of bodies weighing a total of six metric tons (about 4,400 pounds) to be taken to the Moscow region.

The private military company reportedly requires that the trucks have refrigerated storage areas.

Ukraine could strike Devastating blow to Putin as military struggles - Crimea has emerged as a central talking point in the war in Ukraine, and as President Zelenskyy's military forces continue their momentum on the battlefield, Russia faces a legitimate threat of losing the peninsula it took by force in 2014, according to military analysts.

After Ukraine surprised experts around the globe by mounting a strong defense against the Russian invasion that began in late February, Zelenskyy began publicly stating that he wants Crimea to be once again considered part of his country.

Meanwhile, Putin will not only refuse to relinquish Crimea, but he has said he wants four Ukrainian territories he illegitimately annexed in September to be recognized as part of Russia before he agrees to any potential peace talks.

However, he may not be given the choice for negotiations.

"Militarily, it is a possibility" that Zelenskyy could take control of Crimea, John Spencer, a retired U.S. Army major and chair of Urban Warfare Studies at the Madison Policy Forum, told Newsweek.

"I think it is feasible with the 'Arsenal of Democracy' the Ukrainian military can militarily create a situation where it isn't tenable for Russian formations to be in [Crimea's largest city] Sevastopol and places like that," Spencer said.

Sean Spoons, a U.S. Navy veteran and editor-in-chief of the military news outlet SOFREP, told Newsweek that Ukraine taking Crimea by force is "entirely realistic." "When you look at a map of the region, you can see that Crimea is supplied by three routes," Spoons explained. "Along two highways that run from Russia and Ukraine from north to south. Then there is the small Chonhar Bridge to the north. To the west is the Kerch bridge which carries both road and rail traffic.

"Ukraine has blown this up," he said. "Finally, there is a narrow causeway from Russia that runs on the Eastern border of Crimea, which would be a death trap to any supply convoys trying to use it. Ukraine could cut it on the north and south ends, trapping everything on it with water on both sides of the causeway."

He continued: "If Ukraine cuts supply routes on the west and north, it will be all but impossible for Russia to supply its military units in Crimea, which are considerable. The Black Fleet would have to evacuate the port of Sevastopol and move East to ports in Georgia.

"Ukraine would push down from the north, bring its missiles into range of these transportation choke points and cut the Russian Army and Russian civilians off from supplies and even retreat by land," Spoons said.

Ukraine gaining control of Crimea would require a huge undertaking, but if Zelensky managed to do so, Putin would be greatly impacted, according to Catholic University of America history professor Michael Kimmage.

"If Crimea would be lost, it would provide a sense in Russia that Putin is not able to manage things and would definitely weaken him politically," Kimmage told Newsweek.

Kimmage noted that control of Crimea also gives Putin a strategic advantage, as he mounted his invasion in southern Ukraine from the peninsula. As such, its geographic position could be part of the reason why Zelenskyy would want control of Crimea.

Professor and chair of the political science department at Northwestern University, William Reno told Newsweek that if Ukraine did take back Crimea, Zelenskyy could be facing resistance from the citizens who currently reside there.

"A pragmatist might wonder whether Ukraine's government wants to rule a place that has a lot of people who prefer that the place be part of Russia," Reno said. "While Russia's 2014 referendum was a sham, that doesn't cancel out the fact that a significant part of the population was OK with Russia's rule. This history and the contemporary political fact make it more likely that Crimea could be a subject for future negotiation."

Comments – (i) We have included this element in a number of previous Updates. Ukraine controls Crimean water supply from within Kherson Oblast. Cutting this, as was done by the Turks in 1405 AD further up the road, and closing bridge access points between Kherson and Crimea and between the peninsula and Russia to the east, will effectively starve Crimea into submission, just as happened in 1405 AD. (ii) Russia moved thousands of Russian citizens into Crimeapost-2014 and has moved genuine Crimeans off the island and into other Russian provinces. This is precisely how they have moved populations around for centuries. Even if a majority of "Crimeans" want to remain subject to Russian control, just the mere fact that Ukraine has military control of the peninsula is a huge element of leverage to them.

But Crimea was part of Ukraine ever since Khrushchev handed it to them in 1957.

Wounded Russian soldiers returned to front without proper treatment - A number of injured Russian soldiers are being sent back to the frontlines in Ukraine without permission from the military medical commission, the Agentstvo investigative outlet reported Thursday.

The presidential Human Rights Council is investigating cases in which servicemen didn't receive proper medical treatment before being sent back into battle, council member Olga Demicheva told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency on Tuesday.

"We learned about a situation when soldiers who received high-tech medical care and with recommendations for rehabilitation were immediately sent to the front instead of rehabilitation," Demicheva said. Valentina Melnikova, the secretary of Russia's Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, also confirmed to Agentstvo that some soldiers were not receiving proper rehabilitation.

Terrified draftees expose Russia's new scheme to cover up cannon fodder deaths - Russian draftees reportedly fear they have been sent on a suicide mission by top military officials who are planning to conceal their deaths through an inventive new scheme: changing records to show they are part of a regiment that doesn't exist.

"They assigned us to regiment 228—such a regiment does not exist," one of the men told the independent news outlet Sota. "They want to send us to a hot spot tomorrow with machine guns [to go] against tanks, drones, and mortars on minefields. We're just cannon fodder."

Sota reports that they've obtained an audio message recorded by some of the draftees, appealing for help on behalf of the 400 men who hail from the Altai Republic. In it they say they're being sent to storm an area near Svatove in Ukraine's Luhansk region.

"Please help in any way you can. We've already been given drugs, [the opioid analgesic] Promedol, in case of serious injuries," the message said.

The men described manipulation of their official paperwork that effectively rendered them lost without a trace.

"Some colonel-generals came here, I don't know, they couldn't find us. We were tossed on the very front, we're under the artillery."

The move suggests Russian officials are desperate for some manpower after military analysts noted Ukrainian troops had gained more ground on the Svatove-Kreminna line in recent days. Draftees from Russia's Tomsk region had also publicly appealed to the governor in November for help with a "difficult situation" near Svatove.

As the Kremlin now preps for a "large-scale war" against Ukraine, military officials are apparently hell-bent on making the most of the cannon fodder already on the battlefield. The independent news outlet Agentstvo reported on Thursday that wounded troops are being tossed back on the frontline without any official sign-off from doctors.

"Soldiers with shrapnel in their limbs and bullets through their lungs are being returned to the front," the outlet noted.

Amid fears of a fresh full-scale mobilization across the whole country, the State Duma's defense committee is also pushing to drag more Russians into the war.

"We do not have a trained mobilization reserve for waging a large-scale war, if NATO unleashes it. One out of every ten has served in the army, and nine out of ten people have not served in the army. What kind of reserve are they making?" Viktor Sobolyev, a member of the committee, told local media on Wednesday.

Putin

Kremlin turf war - Hundreds of kilometres away from Ukraine, another battle is raging – a turf war within the Kremlin walls for access to Putin that translates into more funding and power.

The warring clans include Putin's former colleagues and country-club neighbours whom he appointed to top positions in the 2000s – and who compete with younger technocrats he started to promote in the past decade.

One of the new clans in the corridors of power has been forged between Putin's "chef" and "bulldog."

The "chef" is Yevgeny Prigozhin, a former criminal convicted of robbery and fraud in the 1980s who used his prison experiences to find new recruits for the war.

Prigozhin earned his nickname after winning countless catering contracts since the early 2000s. He then started the Wagner Group, a private military army that cut its teeth on the front lines of Ukraine's 2014 separatist war and in Syria.

Apart from thousands of mercenaries, Prigozhin began to enlist tens of thousands of inmates from Russian jails, promising them amnesty and hefty salaries.

One of them was Sergey Molodtsov, who was sentenced to 11.5 years for killing his mother, was killed in eastern Ukraine and buried in the western town of Serov this week.

Prigozhin has claimed that his forces spearheaded Russia's offensive in southeastern Ukraine and has said that they single-handedly took the town of Soledar.

General Surovikin reportedly was the "chef's" most trusted ally within the top brass.

But Prigozhin's biggest ally has been Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, dubbed "Putin's bulldog," who also boasted of sending his loyalists to the trenches, although their real role has been disputed and even ridiculed.

Both Prigozhin and Kadyrov have been at odds with Russia's top brass over funding and role in the campaign.

Western analysts have viewed Gerasimov's rise as a warning signal to Prigozhin.

Gerasimov's appointment is a "political decision to reassert the primacy of the Russian Defense Ministry in an internal Russian power struggle," the Institute for the Study of War, an international group of military analysts, said on Wednesday.

But the top brass has been divided, too.

Shoigu oversaw the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support to separatists in southeastern Ukraine in 2014.

Gerasimov was behind the actual planning, and in 2015, Ukrainian prosecutors called him the "chief ideologue" of the separatist war that killed more than 13,000 and uprooted millions.

However, many separatists have been highly skeptical of Gerasimov.

"I am in a sacred awe awaiting the new outstanding victories that will be achieved by this widely recognised military genius," Igor Strelkov, a former "defence minister" of separatists in Donetsk wrote sarcastically on Telegram on Thursday.

And many in Ukraine, where resistance and hope remain strong, agree that the new commander will fail to stop Russia from losing the war.

"It doesn't really matter who commands, it just shows that Russia is in a difficult position regarding successes, potential successes in Ukraine," Oleksiy Haran, a politics professor at the Kyiv Mohila Academy, told Al Jazeera.

Wartime Putinism - what the disaster in Ukraine has done to the Kremlin—and to Russia - Winning a long war requires a mobilization of troops and supplies that can outlast the other side. Positive objectives and clearly defined goals are the path to victory. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt was able to mobilize American society around the imperative of Japan's unconditional surrender. After a shocking attack on U.S. soil, Americans rallied around the objectives of defeating Japan, avenging the assault on Pearl Harbor, and eliminating the threat posed by imperial Japan. Those goals would have been sufficient to sustain the U.S. war effort, but Americans had an additional aim: to strike a blow for democracy. By defeating Japan, the United States would encourage the democratization (and, by extension, the Americanization) of Asia.

Putin has not followed this classic formula. In fact, he has inverted it, by attacking Ukraine first and only then attempting to mobilize Russian society. He has described what Russia is doing in Ukraine not as a war but as a "special military operation." He has never articulated a set of persuasive objectives; his stated goals have shifted over time.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has at various points aimed to halt an invented genocide, to "de-Nazify" a country that was not fascist, to liberate Ukraine's allegedly Russian nature, and to demilitarize the country—even though it posed no real threat to Russia. According to VTsIOM, a state-owned polling institution, a majority of Russians considered Ukraine a friendly country before the war. Only 11 percent of Russians saw Ukraine as an enemy.

It is tempting to see Putin's war as a total failure. From Kyiv to Kherson, Russia has endured significant battlefield losses. It has solidified Western support for Ukraine on a scale unthinkable before the war and provoked a formidable response from Kyiv.

As Ukraine's military improves, Russia's prospects for ending the war on its terms are fading away—not that these terms have ever been clear. It also faces sanctions by many of the world's richest and most technologically advanced countries. With so many forces arrayed against Putin, experts have speculated about a possible crackup of his regime.

But the regime in the Kremlin is hardly on the verge of collapse. Putin has used the war to clamp down on Russian society, to pull elites even closer to him, and to shore up his domestic position. No longer able to lean on his reputation as a foreign policy genius—capable of wresting Crimea from Ukraine (as he did in 2014) or making Russia a serious player in the Middle East (as he did in 2015)—the Russian president has instead focused on militarizing the state and the public sphere, purging those who openly dissent from the government's position on the war, and stoking militant anti-Westernism among the wide swaths of the public that are, if not pro-war, at least genuinely anti-antiwar.

Call it "wartime Putinism." More repressive and less flexible than prewar Putinism, it has imposed the spirit of war on the Russian population. The price of not winning a war, however, is a panoply of negative objectives: not losing, not giving up, not admitting defeat, not allowing anything to threaten the survival of the regime. A fundamentally empty project, wartime Putinism is a Faustian bargain with Russia's future. The Kremlin is no longer achieving a record of success but enforcing a narrative of success that is at odds with the reality on the ground. The war has created a version of Putinism that offers diminishing returns.

Normalizing war

Putin has never been shy about waging war. His tenure as Russia's president began with an inherited conflict in Chechnya and entanglement in Moldova. In 2008, when he was serving as prime minister, Russia invaded Georgia. And two years after he became president again in 2012, Putin annexed Crimea and infiltrated eastern Ukraine.

By 2015, Russia's military and intelligence services were taking an expeditionary turn, intervening in Syria, meddling in foreign elections, and flexing their muscles in Africa. Putin has long enjoyed being filmed and photographed as Russia's C-i-C, and he has turned the public celebration of victory in World War II into a keystone of post-Soviet Russian identity.

This was the political and cultural trajectory that led to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Yet that invasion was a turning point, a rupture even, making Putin's government inseparable from war. Russia's operations in Ukraine are on a different scale from those of Putin's previous wars. The stakes are higher, as is the level of political repression.

Putin has exploited the war to reduce the political liberties of Russians to zero: no right to free speech, no right to assembly, no right to organize opposition to the government. The imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, which occurred before the war, might have been more conspicuous without the war. Indeed, the tug of war between Putin and opposition forces escalated in 2012, when he came back to the Kremlin for a third presidential term, and in 2018, at the peak of Navalny's efforts to forge an alternative to Putinism. This tug of war has vanished.

Meanwhile, wartime Putinism has had a surprisingly limited effect on the Russian economy. The same technocrats who warned Putin of the war's potentially devastating consequences about a month before it began have worked hard to keep the Russian economy going since February 2022. Sanctions are closing off options for the Russian military and for some Russian businesses (those dealing in metallurgy, automotive parts, machinery, and equipment), whereas other

Russian businesses (food or aluminum, for example) have been holding their own (**Comment** – I would differ on the latter where Ukrainian raw minerals have been eliminated by the invasion).

Sanctions may prove more meaningful over time, yet have not done that much to alter the lives of ordinary Russians (**Comment** – ? - car production is down by over 50% and civilian air travel hugely and negatively impacted). Those with means can still live comfortable lives (**Comment** – yet cannot go to their favored holiday spot in Crimea or travel the globe to sunny destinations because of sanctions). Those without means did not have much to lose, anyway (**Comment** – aside from their young sons killed in action). The government has been spending money lavishly on pensioners, poorer Russians, and those connected to the war effort; unemployment is low. If middle-class Russians and small-business owners have been hurt by the war, they are adjusting (**Comment** – mobilization and conscription of small business workers is emaciating output and microeconomic multiplier contribution). At least for now, Russia shows every sign of being able to muddle through economically. (**Comment** – the dire effect of the oil price cap is now beginning to filter through and drastic shortages in raw materials and minerals are shutting long-existing production plants, all set to fundamentally diminish their economy).

And for the time being, Putin can depend on the acquiescence of the Russian population. To what degree Putin is viewed as an effective wartime leader is hard to say. But very few Russians, even those who would not have opted for war back in February 2022, want their country to lose in Ukraine. Defeat can be feared even in a disastrous war, and Putin is politically insulated by such fear. Even if winning is beyond him at this point, many Russians believe they need him as their leader to stave off defeat.

Still, there are relatively few true believers in Putin's war in Russia.

They tend to be older, politically marginalized, and living in remote regions of the country. These are the people for whom Putin's arguments about Western malignance most acutely resonate. According to a November 2022 Levada poll, 81 percent of Russians over the age of 55 have negative feelings about the West. For these Russians, Ukraine oscillates between being an enemy aligned with the West and a part of Russia, living since 2014 under an illegitimate government and suffering from the artificial Ukrainian identity imposed on it by nationalist fanatics in Ukraine and by those in the West that fund and encourage these fanatics.

The problem with true believers is that their beliefs can get in the way. An ad hoc assembly of bloggers and commentators on the messaging service Telegram have drummed up the kind of support for the war that state-run media outlets cannot inspire—something more spontaneous and sincere, with all the emotional power of social media.

But it is from these same corners of the Russian media ecosystem that vocal critics of Russia's military tactics has emerged. Many of them think that the war is not being fought aggressively enough. Over the past few months, the Kremlin has tolerated these voices, but it has also reined them in. After all, these figures are pro-war and pro-regime. Now and then, they have to be reminded to stay within their limits.

Among the political elite, outright criticism of the war is inconceivable. The Russian government forces critics out of the country, intimidates those who stay, and prosecutes those who are not intimidated. Those still in Russia face professional retaliation, public stigmatization, and arrest for opposing the war.

Ilya Yashin, a leading opposition politician, was arrested and sentenced to eight and a half years in prison for discussing the massacre that Russian forces carried out in the Ukrainian city of Bucha. Almost 400 others have had criminal cases brought against them as a result of their antiwar activism, and more than 5,500 have been fined, detained, or banned from certain activities. In the absence of an effective opposition party or movement, overtly antiwar statements register as isolated gestures, underscoring the Kremlin's seemingly unshakable hold on Russia's political sphere and on Russian public opinion.

Despite being so visibly in control of the political scene, the Kremlin is taking no chances. Western media has focused on the September mobilization. At least as consequential has been the militarization of the public sphere. Only a minority of Russians are actively engaged in the war, but all must demonstrate their acquiescence in the war, an acquiescence that does not imply passionate support.

Mass media, the cultural world, and the educational sector have all played a role in either justifying the war or in laying the groundwork for a war that will last as long as Putin thinks it must. Sometimes the goal is to stoke the emotions of war. A more subtle goal is to make the war seem routine, an organic and inevitable part of Russian life.

Walking a tightrope

Wartime Putinism is an experiment in deferring problems. Further Ukrainian advances on the battlefield or even the military status quo may force Putin into another mobilization, something he will avoid as long as he can, testing as it will the bona fides of wartime Putinism. Mobilization is itself traumatic, and mobilization without military progress is more than traumatic. It is a rebuke to those in positions of military and political responsibility. But Russia's first round of mobilization occurred amid battlefield setbacks, and the Kremlin survived it intact (**Comment** – this ignores internal Kremlin disruption being observed with constant command rotation and demotion). A version of this cycle might simply repeat itself. Or the government may opt for expanding the conscription of young men (**Comment** – this ignores this week's Kremlin notice of increasing conscription age to 30).

Wartime Putinism could also undermine itself through stasis. Russia can unite around the bleak mission of not losing a war for only so long. After the end of the Soviet Union, in 1991, Russian President Boris Yeltsin promised prosperity, political liberty, and Russia's integration into Europe. He fell short in the execution, but at early stages of his rule those goals represented a galvanizing mission for post-Soviet Russia, and between 1991 and 2000, Yeltsin did bring Russia closer to the free market and to Europe. During his tenure, Putin's mission has been more nebulous: stability and prosperity at home after the economic disruptions of the 1990s; Russian military might abroad; and a seat at the table of international politics. Putin's 2022 war has damaged Russia's international reputation, and it has dented the perception of Russian military might. What is left is the drive for stability through militarization, a paradoxical political aspiration.

Wartime Putinism is a reduced Putinism, and it would be impossible to describe today's Russia (to Russians) as an ascendant power. It is, rather, an embattled power. This explains the frenzied media campaign to drum up support for the war, which masks the fact that Putin has committed Russia to a long cycle of stagnation.

Isolation and sanctions will together contribute to Russia's economic and technological decline. Nobody can say how long Putin can walk this dispiriting tightrope. His warpath does not lead from point A to point B but a circuitous route from point A back to point A. A fine-tuned method for avoiding failure, wartime Putinism has all the hallmarks of a dead end. *Extracted from the January 13 Foreign Affairs article as commented upon by myself.*

Impacts

74 percent of Europeans support EU's backing for Ukraine, poll finds - An overwhelming majority of EU citizens back the bloc's continued support for Ukraine, the latest Eurobarometer poll released Thursday shows.

Asked if they approved of the bloc's position of support for Ukraine, 74 percent answered yes, with a third saying they "strongly" approved.

Almost as many — 73 percent — said they agreed with the EU's financial, military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine as well as sanctions against Russia, just as member countries are considering whether to speed up their military support for Ukraine.

We all learn from Russia's diminution in Ukraine - Russia's disastrous "Special Military Operation" – universally recognized as an illegal invasion of a neighboring country - is teaching militaries around the globe two things – firstly what to do and not to do, and secondly that the "Bear" is emasculated.

Regarding the former, we yesterday covered at length the growing percentages of national GDP being attributed to defense requirements, some more so than others.

Aside from defense growing as a percentage of GDP, simultaneous and augmented awareness of the need to change, discard historical policies and embrace new technology, drone warfare and tactical adaptation is rapidly upon us.

Killer robots cannot be too far off drone technology, instant information relay too far away, AI introduction, interpretation and application too distant, and rising war frequency and normalization too far away from realization that remote conflict reduces threat to blood and treasure in war.

It is still too early to gauge change, if one ever can, but watch for countries sending dated equipment into Ukraine, clearing decks for a modernization of armor, technology, communication, application and tactic. Watch for countries using the invasion as a political clearing ground for future approach and coalescence of direction and dogma.

And watch for steep and rapid introduction and adoption of AI as an essential element of war.

Just like COVID-19 enabled employers with ironclad union agreements to breach retrenchment clauses by citing "force majeure" as the reason for cutting headcount, so too will countries and militaries cite lessons learnt by Russia's invasion as reason enough to acclimate.

Just as Prime Minister Botha said in Durban, South Africa in his 1985 "Rubicon Speech," – "Adapt or Die."

Regarding the latter, we have previously covered the diminution, or as some say "demonization," of the Russian Bear.

It appears a process of political bombogenesis is taking place before our very eyes where the pressure in the center of the Russian doctrinal cyclone is rapidly dropping, producing hurricane force winds of change around the perimeter.

Putin and his Kremlin cronies have unleashed the devil in the empire of international affairs, particularly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia by their actions of a scorched earth policy and complete disregard for protocol, diplomacy, agreement and human suffering.

But most of all, they have self-disastrously diminished the "awe" previously instilled in tens of nations around the world in their ability - political, financial, influence and most of all, militarily.

Just as the two Boer Wars taught the British Empire that change was demanded, and just as Musk's Starlink showed a dramatic change in ground warfare, so too will Russia's invasion of Ukraine teach and instruct change.

"The Emperor finally has no clothes."

Russian warships are heading to South Africa in the latest sign of Moscow's growing presence - Late next month, two Russian warships will sail into South African waters, near the cities of Durban and Richards Bay, to practice their gunnery, force protection and air defence skills.

The naval deployment on the southern coast of Africa will be a vivid reminder of Moscow's expanding influence on a continent that is increasingly crucial to its global strategy. This is a big year for the Russian charm offensive in Africa, with political summits, diplomatic visits and military exercises on the agenda.

The naval drills in late February are just one element of the plan, in which SA is emerging as one of Moscow's most loyal partners.

The Russian warships are scheduled to join South African and Chinese ships in a joint military exercise, code-named Mosi (“smoke”), from Feb. 17 to 26. Hundreds of military personnel will participate.

South Africa’s biggest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, described the exercise as a government attempt to curry favour with the Kremlin. Its defence critic, Kobus Marais, said it “confirms without doubt the South African government’s support to Russia for their illegal invasion of Ukraine.”

The government, however, has repeatedly made clear that it will not be influenced by Western sanctions on Russia, including those on Russian oligarchs and ships.

In October, it announced it would allow Russian steel magnate Alexey Mordashov to sail his US\$500-million superyacht into Cape Town’s harbour, even though he is under sanctions imposed by the United States, Britain and the European Union. The 142-metre yacht was reportedly heading for Cape Town at the time, although it later changed course.

Last month, Pretoria allowed a Russian cargo ship, the Lady R, to dock at a naval base near Cape Town and unload a shipment of goods – reportedly ammunition for the South African military – even though the vessel was under U.S. sanctions for its role in supplying the Russian military after the invasion of Ukraine.

Will the war in Ukraine spell the end of Transnistria? - Putin's war in Ukraine has not been going according to plan. Russia's aggression could even inadvertently bring an end to the Transnistria conflict in neighboring Moldova.

Russia's war on Ukraine has not been going as Putin intended. He hasn't been able to defeat Ukraine, and it seems probable that he won't. Nor has he succeeded in paralyzing and dividing the European Union and NATO — quite the opposite, in fact.

Indeed, contrary to his plans, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are now several steps closer to EU integration than they had ever dreamed possible.

There may also be other unintended consequences of the war in Ukraine. One of the most important would be the resolution of the Transnistria conflict in Moldova.

In 1991-92, Russia showed the world for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union that it was capable of destabilizing and dividing a former Soviet republic, arming pro-Russia separatists in Moldova, unleashing a war, creating a pseudo state (Transnistria) and then freezing the conflict for an extended period of time.

The resulting pro-Russia breakaway region of Transnistria is a narrow strip of land almost 200 kilometers (120 miles) long and 30 kilometers wide between the Dniester River and Moldova's eastern border with Ukraine. It split from Moldova in 1992 but is not recognized as a sovereign state by the international community or, indeed, even by Russia.

Just under 2,000 Russian soldiers are still stationed in Transnistria. The village of Cobasna in the north is home to Europe's largest military depot, where about 20,000 tons of Soviet-era ammunition and equipment are stored. Although Russia officially agreed in 1999 to withdraw both its troops and weapons from Transnistria within a few years, it never did so.



Europe's 'black hole'

For over 30 years, Transnistria has been a "black hole" in Europe, as a report by the European Parliament put it in 2002. It has kept itself afloat with money from Moscow and with smuggling, human trafficking and money laundering.

For many years, Ukraine also played a role in this development: After 1992, members of the ruling elite in Ukraine and Russian economic officials created a smuggling ring centered on Transnistria that bolstered the economy in the breakaway region, making it impossible for Moldova to exert any economic control over it. Over time, corrupt members of Moldova's elite were also drawn into these illicit dealings.

Ukrainian ports vital for Transnistria's economy

Transnistria's economy depended on illegal transportation of goods to and from Odesa and other ports on the Black Sea for 30 years.

It all began in the 1990s, when the then-president of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma, rolled out the red carpet for Igor Smirnov, first president of the self-proclaimed, internationally unrecognized Republic of Transnistria. The reason for the warm welcome was Kuchma's son-in-law was owner of the one of the largest steel companies in Transnistria.

Over the years, other politicians in Kyiv were enticed into doing "business" with the separatists in Transnistria behind Moldova's back.

Change in Ukraine's policy toward Transnistria

Ukraine now admits that it owes Moldova because it tolerated the "black hole" for decades and even profited from it. Pro-government press in Kyiv devoted many column inches to the analysis of this subject and has even suggested that a possible Russian defeat in the war on Ukraine should result in the dissolution of pro-Russia Transnistria.

"Kyiv just ignored the Transnistria issue, and some authorities benefited from this smuggling 'black hole.' Everything changed with the full-scale Russian invasion," journalist Sergiy Sydorenko wrote recently in European Pravda. "It is obvious that a frozen conflict near the border threatens national security and limits the European future of Ukraine and Moldova."

The question now, he wrote, is "how actually to eliminate the frozen conflict."

Tanks on the border

When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Ukrainian authorities gave orders for the Transnistrian section of the Moldova–Ukraine border to be closed and secured by tanks. This brought the smuggling to an abrupt halt.

The separatist regime in Transnistria's capital, Tiraspol, responded with complaints about an "economic blockade" and called on Russia to step in and save the breakaway region. So far, its calls have been ignored.

What's more, Tiraspol's hope that Russia would swiftly occupy Ukraine and that the breakaway region would be unified with Russia was dashed by the resistance of Ukraine's army.

Conflict resolution by peaceful means

The government in Moldova's capital, Chisinau, stands in solidarity with Ukraine, helps Ukrainian refugees and is firmly convinced that, in doing so, it is on the right side of history.

It is also convinced that the Transnistria conflict should only be resolved by peaceful means and in a way that does not obstruct Moldova's pro-EU course. President Maia Sandu has said Moldova must become a member of the European Union by the end of the decade.

In European Pravda, Sydorenko described Moldova's approach to the current situation. "Bloody Russian aggression against Ukraine only strengthens the desire of Moldovans to avoid war at all costs," he wrote. "There are no circumstances under which Chisinau would consent to welcome the Armed Forces of Ukraine on its territory." He also emphasized that Ukraine's government understands this fact.

Moldova's soft, soft approach

The Moldovan government's defense budget for 2023 is its biggest ever. Much of the money will be spent on securing Moldovan airspace. The country's armed forces will also be beefed up by Piranha armored vehicles from Germany.

Nevertheless, Moldova's government not only wants to avoid military confrontation with Transnistria — it also wants to avoid exerting any economic pressure on the separatist regime in Tiraspol. "We're all in the same boat. We should not upset the balance," Oleg Serebrian, Moldova's deputy prime minister for reintegration, said recently.

And he has good reason for saying so: Moldova relies on electricity from the Cuciurgan power station, which is located in Transnistria and is powered by Russian gas that is supplied by Moldova. As absurd as the situation may seem — as if Moldova is supporting and bankrolling the separatists — it is a necessity because, without power from Cuciurgan, the lights would go out in Moldova.

Containment

EU needs to keep increasing pressure on Russia – von der Leyen - The European Union needs to keep increasing pressure on Russia and supporting Ukraine, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said.

"We need to keep increasing the pressure on Russia and we will continue, of course, our unwavering support for Ukraine," she told a news conference.

At the start of Sweden's six-month presidency of the European Union, von der Leyen said that Russia had cut 80 percent of gas supplies to the EU in eight months since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, but that the EU had compensated by diversifying.

NATO is relocating several of its surveillance planes currently stationed in Germany to Romania, where they will be in closer proximity to Russia's war against Ukraine.

Poland to host German troops, receive Patriot anti-aircraft systems - Authorities have given permission for several hundred German soldiers to be stationed in the country, who will arrive with Patriot systems.

The Germans have reassured Poland that the Patriot launchers will reach both Poland and Ukraine. The German soldiers are expected to arrive in Poland after the weekend, with agreement signed by Polish President Andrzej Duda.

The allocation of the systems to both Poland and Ukraine is not expected to affect how many launchers will reach Poland, a German government spokesman assured.

It is expected to take about eight weeks to train Ukrainian soldiers to use the patriots donated by Germany. The launchers are intended to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian missile attacks and to help Poland ensure its security against missiles that may fall on its territory. The German training in the use of the launchers will be attended by some 90 to 100 Ukrainian soldiers – as many as are needed to operate one battery.

The German battery of Patriot systems, which will be handed over to the Ukrainians by the Germans, is the second such set to be delivered to troops under Kyiv's authority. In December, the delivery of the first battery of sets of this type to the Ukrainians was announced by US President Biden.

Food

There may not be enough food for everyone in 2023 - We will struggle with having enough food in the future. We may not have enough food for everybody in 2023. There's no doubt we can produce enough food for the world's population; humanity's strategic enough to achieve that. The question is whether—because of war and conflict and corruption and destabilization—we do.

200 years ago, there were 1.1 billion people on planet earth, and 95% of them lived in extreme poverty. Today, less than 10% are in extreme poverty. But in the last five years, we're absolutely going backwards—and it's not just a little bit, either. That should frighten the hell out of anybody.

Six years ago, there were 80 million people marching to starvation. That number went to 135 million right before COVID, [because of] man-made conflict and climate shocks. COVID comes along and the number goes to 276 million. That's before Ethiopia. That's before Afghanistan. That's before Ukraine. Ukraine grows enough food to feed 400 million people. It went from the biggest breadbasket of the world to the longest breadlines. Compounded by fertilizer pricing, droughts, supply-chain disruption, fuel costs, food costs, shipping costs, we now have 349 million people marching to starvation.

Food security is the crisis of modern times. If you want to know which countries over the next 12 to 18 months could have destabilization and mass migration, start with the 49 knocking on famine's door right now. And the new numbers are coming in on wheat production, grain production, cereal production in India, Argentina, Brazil, and it's down, down, down, down. The question now is how to move that forward. Because it's not a quick fix.

Leaders do not have enough money to fund every need. They've got to prioritize what's critical to stability on earth, things that are in their national security interest. A lot of leaders say, Why should I send money to Guatemala or Chad when I've got infrastructure, education, health care needs in Michigan or Bavaria? I say a child from Guatemala or Honduras who is in a shelter on the U.S. border costs \$4,000 per week. With \$1 to \$2 a week per child, I can build a resilience program so that child has food security at home.

World leaders are all running around playing Whac-a-Mole and not solving serious problems in the world. Slow down, solve Yemen, solve Ethiopia, solve Ukraine—just solve one of them.

If you do analytics on places like Somalia and the Sahel—Niger, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso—where we've been able to do resilience programs, the impact on those communities of recent shocks is less, and they require less support. We can stabilize the population. That also applies to government leaders. I've been trying to get donors to give development dollars to, say, Syria. If I can create food security for the smallholder farmers, they're more self-sufficient and can make independent decisions about their futures.

We can't blame the Somalis for climate change sending them off their farms, although we can blame them for a lot of other things. The message to their leaders though is that if you honestly believe industrialized nations have contributed to climate change, then you have a moral obligation to provide solutions on the ground for adaptation. Do you believe what you're saying or not? And if you don't, be prepared for mass migration that's going to cost a thousand times more. ***Comments by World Food Programme (WFP) Executive director David Beasley.***