

Conflict Update # 314

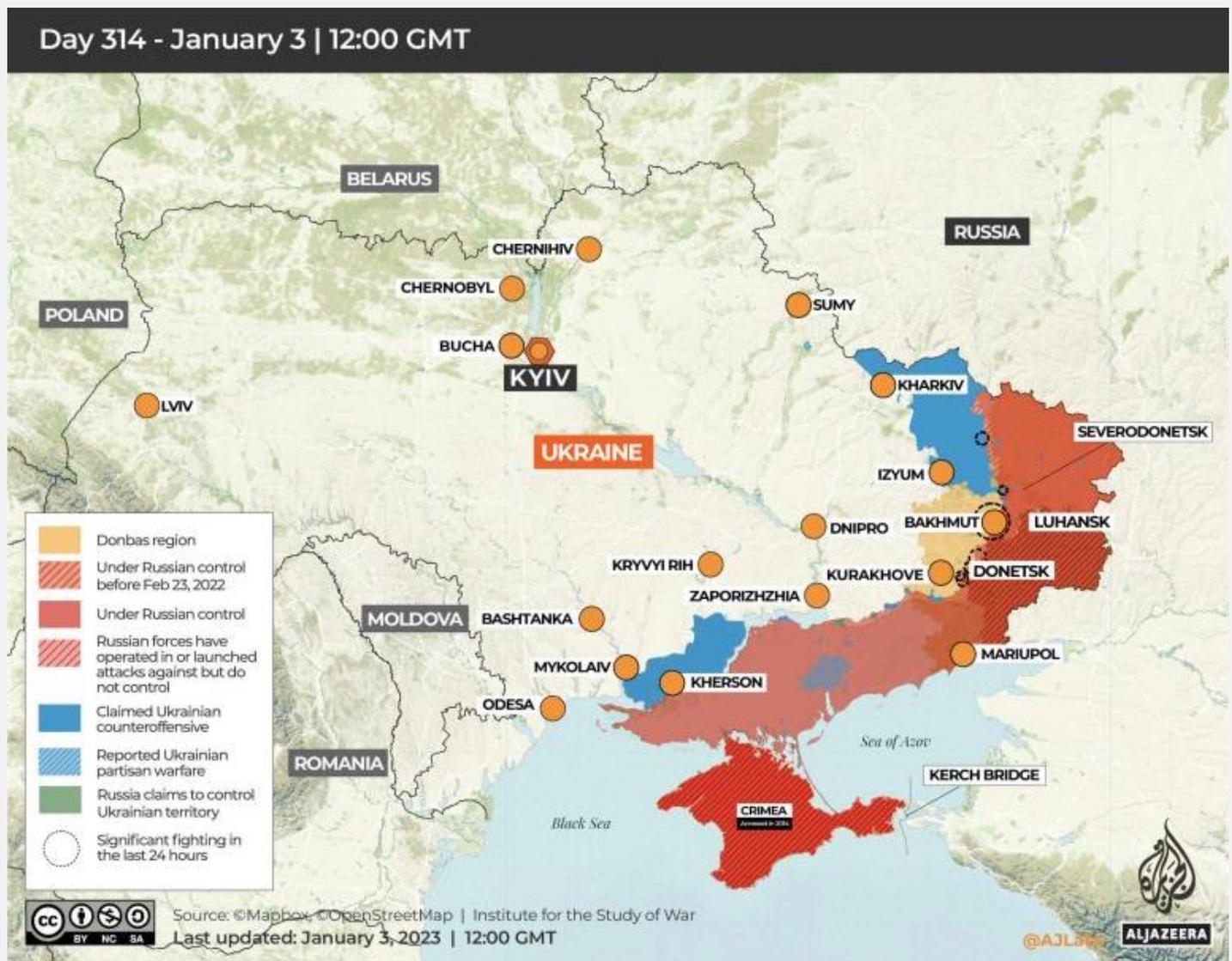
January 3rd, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 108,190 (790) soldiers killed, 3,036 (+5) enemy tanks, 6,100 (+7) armored combat vehicles, 2,033 (+6) artillery systems, 424 (+1) MLRS systems, 214 (+1) air defense systems, 283 (+0) warplanes, 270 (+1) helicopters, 1,839 (+3) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 723 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,735 (+10) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 181 (+0) units of equipment.

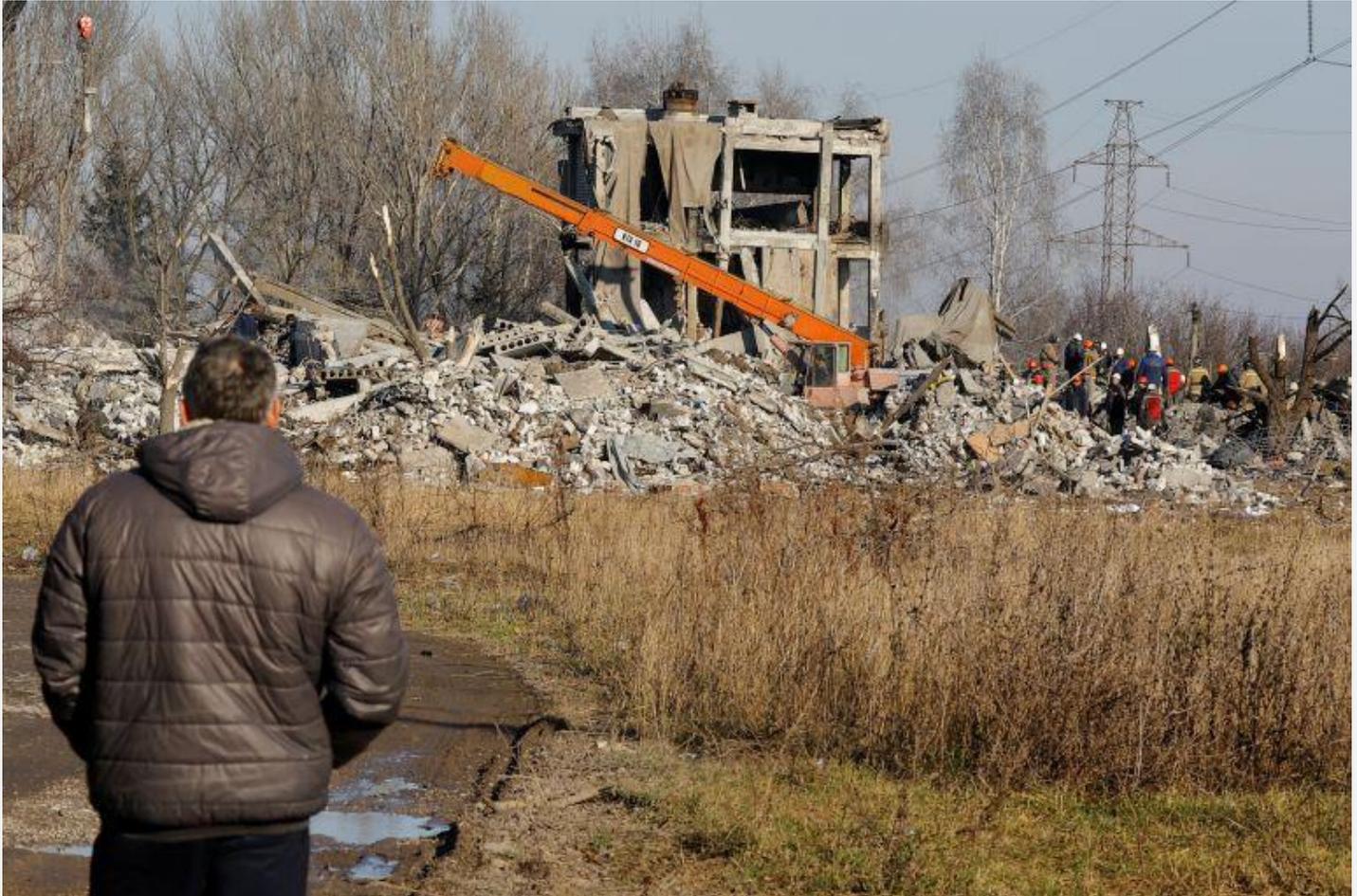
Key Takeaways



Russian anger grows over deadly attack – In a rare show of criticism, Russian nationalists and lawmakers demand punishment for Russian commanders over the deadly January 1 attacks in occupied Makiivka, in Donetsk.

Ukraine says several units of Russian military equipment were damaged or destroyed in the missile strike on a makeshift barracks.

What we know about Ukraine’s attack in Makiivka - The strike on Professional Technical School No 19 in Makiivka, a twin city to the regional capital of Donetsk that has been controlled by Russian proxy forces since 2014, occurred after midnight on New Year’s Day, Daniil Bezsonov, a Russian-installed Donetsk official, said.



Russia’s Ministry of Defence said Ukraine struck with six United States-made HIMARS rockets.

The governor of Russia’s Samara region said that many of the dead soldiers were locals. (**Comment** – this is intended to indict Ukraine is killing innocent civilians to project Russia’s culpability on to Ukraine).

Unconfirmed footage circulated on social media purportedly shows residents watching Russian President Vladimir Putin’s midnight address before running for cover as missiles strike the ground nearby.

Reports of casualties vary. Reuters was unable to independently verify how many people were killed.

Russia’s defence ministry said on Monday that 63 soldiers had been killed in the strike, an assessment echoed by a source close to Donetsk’s Russia-installed separatist leadership, who told Reuters that dozens had died.

The ministry acknowledged the attack only in the final paragraph of a 528-word daily roundup, more than 36 hours after the attack took place.

Russia has consistently underplayed its casualty figures, including claiming that only one man died during the sinking of the battleship Moskva in April 2022.

Ukraine has claimed a far higher casualty figure, saying that around 400 died. (**Comment** – Multiple milbloggers, all Russian commentators and including Igor, an ex-Russian officer who commanded Russian ground forces when it annexed Crimea and separatist areas in 2014, stated that there “are more than 400 killed and some 300 injured.”)

In a post on the Telegram messaging app, Igor Girkin, the former officer referred to above, and instrumental in starting the initial 2014 war in the Donbas, said that there were “many hundreds” of killed and injured.

Girkin said that ammunition and military equipment had been stored in the buildings, contributing to the strength of the blast. He blamed Russia’s “untrainable” generals for the losses.

Grey Zone, a Telegram channel linked to the Wagner mercenary outfit, said that around 500 men were billeted in the complex.

In footage circulated on social media and geolocated by Reuters, the vocational school, a large complex of Soviet-era buildings, appears virtually razed as emergency service workers sift through the rubble.

Comment – There was reportedly tons of ammunition stored in the building basement and further significant amounts in vehicles parked alongside the school, all of which detonated when the HIMARS missiles struck. If there were 500+ soldiers in the facility, and viewing pictures of the aftermath, one above, it is very likely that they were all killed or injured, lending credence to the Ukrainian and milblogger reports.

Backlash in Russia - Coming at the climax of celebrations for the New Year, the most important holiday of the year in Russia, the attack has resonated within Russia.

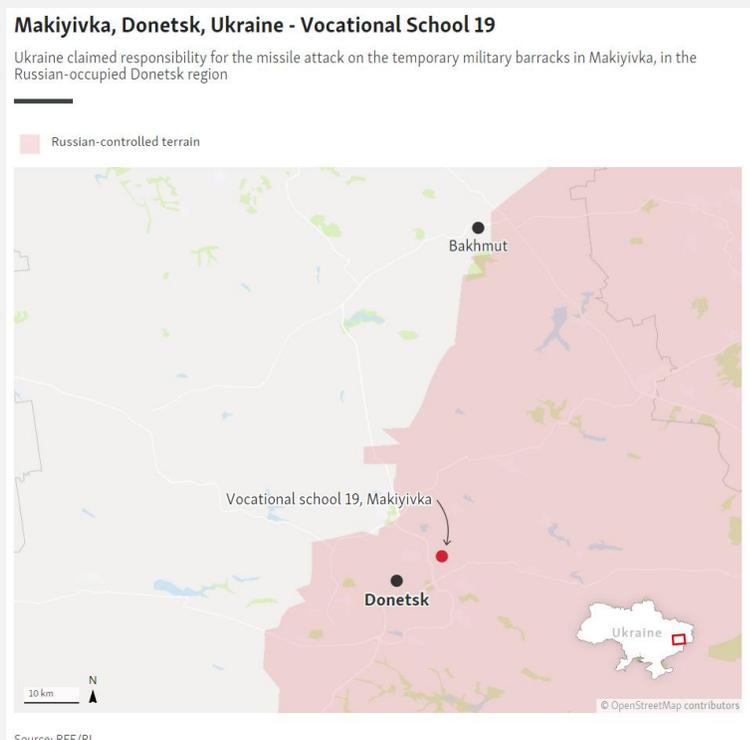
Mourners voiced grief and anger at a rare public commemoration in Russia for the scores of soldiers killed in the Ukrainian strike.

A report by state-owned news agency TASS, citing Donetsk officials and saying that Ukrainian forces were able to identify the target from soldiers using their Russian mobile phones, has provoked anger among Russia’s military blogger community.

“As expected, the blame for what happened in Makiivka began to be blamed on the mobilised soldiers themselves. You see, they turned on their phones and got spotted,” stated the Telegram channel Grey Zone.

Grey Zone went on to blame commanders for lodging large numbers of soldiers in a building vulnerable to artillery fire.

In a post on Telegram, Sergei Mironov, leader of a Kremlin-loyal party in Russia’s parliament, said that an investigation was necessary to determine whether “treachery or criminal negligence” was behind the strike. He said that the officials responsible should be prosecuted.



Russian logistical tactics vary greatly from Ukrainian ones – Ukraine groups its soldiers in concentrations of 10 to 12 men, locating them in small houses dotted around the countryside and close to battle stations, moving by truck at night. This is how they rotate troops and when preparing for combat, keeping them well dispersed and out of sight.

Russian commanders however opt for what they have done for centuries. They consign soldiers from all over Russia to a centralized grouping point, bring them in by train, mass them until they are **all** ready to advance and then issue battle instructions.

Troop and equipment movement is always concentrated around rail networks because this is the only Russian transport capability. These are rail links in occupied territories which Ukrainian planners are intimately familiar with.

Troops are not involved or engaged in any tactical briefing or information system, they merely follow orders without question. They (Russia) have been doing this “forever”.

Any soldier dissenting is punished, often by execution through special Wagner Group squads that follow conventional troop battalions with this particular task in place.

By grouping their battalions into large and clearly visible concentrations, they are vulnerable to Ukrainian partisans, satellite tracking and general observation posts (OPs).

Ukrainian batteries then strike these massed groupings in what is essentially a Russian-planned “killing ground.”

Viewing Ukrainian strikes all across Kherson Oblast, from Kherson City to Melitopol down to the coast and up to Mariupol, and where train lines and junctions run, one can see repeated strikes against Russian positions.

And Russia continues to move and group its forces in this way.

US troops in Romania train close to Russia’s war, in signal to Moscow - The soldiers of the US Army’s 101st Airborne Division train, eat and sleep on a drab, sprawling post in south-east Romania, a mere seven-minute rocket flight from where Russia has stockpiled munitions in Crimea.

Farther north, in military exercises with Romanian troops just a few miles from the Ukrainian border, US soldiers, also from the 101st division, are firing artillery, launching helicopter assaults and digging trenches similar to those on the front lines in the region near Kherson, the Ukrainian port city from which Russian troops retreated in November.

It is the first time the 101st Airborne Division has been deployed to Europe since World War II, and with their presence in Romania, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato), its soldiers are now closer to the war in Ukraine than any other US Army unit.

Its mission is considered a model for an American military that has newly stepped back from two decades of actively fighting wars and into an era of trying to deter adversaries – using a show of force as well as training, weapons shipments and other aid to drive home the point.

“This is a regional conflict, but it has global implications,” the US Army’s chief of staff, General James C. McConville, said in a mid-December interview at the air base, which shares a runway with an adjoining commercial airport named for the former Romanian prime minister, Mihail Kogalniceanu, near the Black Sea.

The troop deployment in Romania is meant as a warning to Moscow, part of President Joe Biden’s pledge to defend “every single inch” of Nato territory without tempting President Vladimir Putin of Russia into escalating the conflict. But holding joint exercises is also a way of ensuring that allies in south-east Europe are ready to hold the line.

Military planners echoed this strategy, noting that the 101st Airborne Division was also using the Black Sea for coastal defense training – a useful skill should China become more aggressive and invade Taiwan, a self-governing island that Beijing has long claimed as its own.

The division was ordered to deploy about 4,000 soldiers and senior commanders just weeks after Russia invaded. They arrived at the air base, near the Romanian coastal city of Constanta, over the summer.

The base previously served as a sleepy outpost for training Nato troops, including several hundred US soldiers, and was known more broadly in the military as a way station with a small mess hall for US forces heading to and from Afghanistan.

Comment – Similar military concentrations and tactical training exercises are taking place in the Baltic countries to the north of Poland and in and around other closely-located

Putin

'It's not his country, it's ours': the Russian 'partisans' at war with the Kremlin - Mystery fires that have broken out across Russia in recent months have been blamed on Ukrainian saboteurs and even Western intelligence operatives. But a new documentary by British filmmaker Jake Hanrahan suggests a "large-scale, active resistance inside Russia" is now being waged by Russia's own citizens.

"There's this thing like, 'Well, it must be the CIA,'" Hanrahan told RFE/RL when asked about the spate of attacks on war-related infrastructure inside Russia. "How about, 'No'? How about some Russians are genuinely so sick of Putin that they're going to do something about it."

Hanrahan is a British filmmaker best known for punchy, "run-and-gun" conflict documentaries released under his own media title Popular Front. In 2020, the Briton landed an interview with "JStark," the maker of a notorious 3D-printable gun model who later died of a reported heart attack after having his house raided by the German police.

In the new film, Russia's Anti-Putin Underground, which was released on YouTube on January 3, two Russian "partisans" meet with Hanrahan in a snowy forest in Eastern Europe, near the border with Russia. With their faces masked and voices disguised, they detail the sabotage actions they claim to have taken part in directly -- including destroying railway lines and a cell-phone tower near the Ukrainian border -- or helped organize for other groups. They claim an estimated 30 cells throughout Russia are united, for now, by their goal of undermining the Kremlin.

The men told the filmmaker they are risking their lives because "it's not [Putin's] country, it's our country," and added: "If not now, then when?"

The pair represent an "anarcho-communist" group known as BOAK, one of several radical leftist organizations in Russia and Belarus whose aims were vague and far-fetched before the 2022 invasion. Now, with a clearly defined short-term goal -- to stop the war on Ukraine -- BOAK has risen in prominence on Telegram, where it actively recruits "comrades."

Hanrahan first reached out to the group on Telegram. "I just said, 'Look, I know you're trying to get your message out there, and I want to do a documentary on this,'" he recalled.

The credibility of the cell was established by asking the group to show footage of some of their attacks that hadn't appeared anywhere online.

"They sent through more than enough," Hanrahan recalls.

Additionally, with years of reporting on various anarchist groups, the journalist says he has a relatively clear understanding of the networks the group moves in.

"Without a doubt in my mind, these guys are the real deal," he said.

When meeting the pair, Hanrahan was first given a general area, then a specific location, right before they were scheduled to meet. After sending an encrypted e-mail to let them know he was there, Hanrahan says the pair appeared out of the forest where they had been waiting nearby.

The two Russians said intelligence on what to target comes from Wikimapia, an open-source website where anyone can add photos and descriptions of objects on a map.

"So you just open [the website] and you find, 'OK, military object is here,'" one of the men said. After multiple scouting trips to their target, the saboteurs attack.

Perhaps the most striking moment of the film comes when the pair matter-of-factly describe why they will never be captured alive.

"It's better to die than be tortured and maybe give up information," one said. The men would use a gun, knives, or "anything [we] can find" to fight to the death, or apparently commit suicide if escape becomes impossible, since "it's all better than to be in a Russian prison."

Hanrahan says he was driven to make the film in part because of what he says is increasingly simplistic reporting of the conflict and a mainstreaming of ethnic hatred on social media.

Comment – This article explains in some way the ongoing yet “mysterious” explosions and fires occurring across Russia, at times hundreds of miles from the Ukraine/Russia border.

Putin's hopes for a harsh winter melt away across Europe - Along with humiliating withdrawals in Ukraine, Putin faces a setback on another front of his invasion with the weather proving to be a tricky opponent.

Europe was braced for a tough winter in anticipation of a Russian response to the sanctions imposed in the wake of Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Russia has been accused of using energy as a weapon and the delivery of oil and gas—its largest exports—was expected to be used to weaken the continent's resolve.

In August, Germany said Moscow was driving up prices when state-owned firm Gazprom, after reducing flows of gas via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, then temporarily halted supplies of the fuel that the pipeline delivers to western Europe.

Three months earlier, the head of the Gas Transmission System Operator of Ukraine said Russia was using the pipeline between Russia and Germany to weaken Ukraine's "security posture."

But Putin's hopes to bend a shivering Europe to his will may have been scuppered, in the short term at least, because of unseasonably warm weather, with average temperatures up to 20 degrees Celsius warmer than normal.

"Putin had bad luck this year, it's really warm in Europe," said energy and geopolitical analyst Thomas O'Donnell.

Impacts

Russia to modernize nuclear forces in 2023, add more multi-warhead nukes - Russia is bolstering its strategic nuclear forces in 2023 with further deployment of multi-warhead nuclear missiles and further modernization of its long-range strategic bomber division, the Russian Defense Ministry announced this week.

The Strategic Rocket Forces branch of the Russian military is set to complete the replacement of the older Topol-M missile system with the RS-24 Yars among its mobile grouping, the ministry said on Tuesday.

The Yars mobile ground missile system is a multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV), which contains several thermonuclear warheads, each of which can hit different targets.

Russian chess champion Alexandra Kosteniuk to represent Switzerland - Former women's world chess champion Alexandra Kosteniuk, who holds dual Russian-Swiss citizenship, will compete on Switzerland's female grandmasters' team as of January 1, 2024, the Swiss Chess Federation said in a statement on January 3. According to the statement, Kosteniuk will play for the country's male grandmasters' team as well, "if need be." Kosteniuk stopped representing Russia after her country launched its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February last year. She currently is playing under the flag of the International Chess Federation (FIDE), the statement says.

Undertones in Russia: war, propaganda, the West – Article by GlobalVoices - We have closely followed Russian state narratives from before the invasion, when state actors said the tensions between the two countries were made up by the West. Since the war broke out, state narratives have hardened and our researchers expect them to solidify in 2023.

Russia has used different narratives to justify the war on Ukraine. One argument, which has weakened in recent months, is that Russia is engaging in the “denazification” of Ukraine for the good of humanity. Russia has also blamed Ukraine for staging its own massacres, going as far as claiming that Ukraine would be ready to bomb itself with a “dirty” nuclear weapon just to blame Russia for it.

The most popular narrative justifies the war on the grounds of self-defense. The Russian state alleges that the West, and specifically NATO, were planning an armed attack against Russia through Ukraine, and therefore a preemptive attack was necessary. The narrative is summed up as “Ukrainians and the West were planning to harm Russia first, so Russia was forced to launch the military operation,” and has gained particular prominence since the West started providing weapons to Ukraine. (**Comment** – Should this be true, then Putin would have been legally justified in calling his invasion a “War” as required by the Russian Constitution, and not merely a “Special Military Operation” as he has done. He would also have been legally allowed to fully mobilize, again something which he has not done. This underlines the fact that Russia was not invaded nor in threat of being invaded).

These narratives have not sprouted from just anywhere. Years of government propaganda have prepared the Russian population to vilify the West. Some of these are an expression of Russia’s pride in helping defeat Nazi regimes during World War II.

Since the war in Ukraine, the Russian state has blocked Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and 200,000 websites, which are now only accessible with a VPN. Many Russian citizens are left with only the abovementioned propaganda narratives peddled on state-sanctioned media and social networks like Telegram and V Kontakte. What is said about the war, then, can vary drastically depending on whether you are checking Facebook or V Kontakte.

It is difficult to know how many Russians are pro- or anti-war because of severe repression of dissenting opinions. With our data analysis, we have scraped media channels, dissected over 250 Russian media items that illustrate local perceptions, and investigated the narratives at play.

Most anti-war content is found on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, whereas Instagram and Telegram are polarized. Many Russians posting anti-war content are based outside the country. Sometimes, they lament the fact that Russians could not take down Putin ahead of time (“Every Russian bears responsibility for the war with Ukraine”), at other times they call Putin supporters “zombies” who are misled and misinformed by propaganda (“Pro-war Russians are ignorant and blind”). Many have started to question what it means to be Russian.

Russian anti-war resistance is strongly associated with decentralized grassroots activist movements such as the Russian feminist movement. Anti-war actions have continued within the country, despite the risks. "Anti-war groups are still decentralized, the only place they can be centralized is in jail," our researcher says.

Many pro-war narratives can be found on state-owned VKontakte. They include the following: "Russians should be proud of their nation and of themselves" and "Failing to support the Russian government in the war against Ukraine is an act of treason."

Putin's call for mobilization to strengthen the Russian army in September 2022 further polarized the country. Here, the narratives were also split into two, with on one side "Russians should not be scared about conscription into the army" and on the other, "Russians should resist being drafted to fight in Ukraine."

The Russian state and its supporters argue that NATO, which includes the United States and many European members, is an enemy seeking to attack Russia, as allegedly proven by their arms supply to Ukraine. Anti-war Russians deplore the lack of support by the West for anti-Putin activists and European arms sales to Russia up until 2021.

In 2022, there have been investigations that Finnish Nokia sold equipment to monitor protesters and that US-based Sandvine equipped the Russian state with Internet censoring technologies. Russians have also complained that the mention of prohibiting the supply of tear gas and taser shockers was only included in the European Union's ninth sanctions package in December 2022.

"Ironically, both the propagandists and anti-war Russians are dissatisfied with the West," our researcher says.

Anti-war Russians criticize the West's "hypocrisy" by stating that "Western countries never tangibly supported Russia's pro-democracy movement" and that "EU countries enabled Putin and the Russian regime." It does not seem that the West's popularity will improve anytime soon.

'The war marks a turning point in the landscape of Ukrainian capitalism' - Many Ukrainians dreamed of it, and Russia did it. **The power of the oligarchs in Ukraine has been greatly weakened** since the beginning of the war in February 2022. They once carried considerable economic, political and media weight there, much more so than in a place like Russia, where the presence of an authoritarian leader like Vladimir Putin limits their influence. The new Forbes ranking, made public on December 27, shows the wealth of the 20 richest people in Ukraine has been cut in half since the war began, falling to \$20 billion (€18.7 billion). But, above all, it is their profile that has changed. The war also marks a turning point in the landscape of Ukrainian capitalism.

Many of the oligarchs who had topped the rankings Soviet Union, have been replaced for the first time the top 20 places. This sector is one of the most industry, agriculture and mining, which made the proximity to political power, start-ups escape made it easy for select and favored Ukrainian keeping Ukraine "friendly" towards Russia, as here, the previous Ukrainian premier who Russia where he remains to this day).



since 1991 independence, after the fall of the by tech entrepreneurs, who now occupy seven of resistant to the Russian invasion. Unlike the steel fortunes of the old oligarchs thanks to their destruction more easily. **(Comment** – Putin also entities to become oligarchs in return for was the case with Viktor Yanukovich, pictured was ousted from power in 2014 and escaped to

In record time, they relocated to the west of the country or abroad. This was the case with SoftServe, whose founding boss, Taras Kytsmey, admitted to only "a bit of stress" when he had to move the 3,500 families of his employees to western Ukraine and another 1,800 abroad. Companies in this sector have another major advantage: They are international. SoftServe has offices in 13 countries, and its clients are often abroad as well. Grammarly, which made the

fortunes of Ukrainians Max Lytvyn and Alex Shevchenko (numbers two and three in the rankings) even has its headquarters in San Francisco.

Russian peacekeepers find themselves sidelined in Nagorno-Karabakh - Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan to drift away from Russia's mediation toward that of the West. Now, Russian peacekeepers in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region appear to be in a catch-22 situation. Azerbaijan is becoming increasingly emboldened by the Kremlin's weakness, with the country's pro-government media now describing the peacekeepers as "occupiers," but Moscow's hands are tied: any response will only make its situation worse.

Since Dec. 12, Azeri eco-activists have blocked the Lachin Corridor, stopping traffic along the only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. Just six months ago, Baku did not contest the special status of the Lachin Corridor, or the right of Armenians to travel unimpeded along it. On the contrary, the Azeri government built a new road well ahead of schedule, bypassing settlements in the Lachin region that had come under Azerbaijan's control.

The trilateral agreement of Nov. 9, 2020 that put a stop to the Second Karabakh War states that "Azerbaijan guarantees safe travel along the Lachin Corridor in both directions for civilians, means of transport, and cargo." Yet Baku is now hinting that the agreement has been violated so many times that its patience has run out.

Until the last few weeks, no one disputed the right of the Russian peacekeepers to decide who could travel to the region's main city, Stepanakert, and who could not. Now Azeri journalists are trying to walk past the peacekeepers' checkpoints along the Lachin Corridor, arguing that they are citizens of Azerbaijan and are simply exercising their unconditional right to move around the territory of their country.

Moscow is choosing to do next to nothing. Since the Lachin Corridor has been blocked, Putin has spoken to both Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev, but that has not defused the tension. On the contrary: on Dec. 13, Azerbaijan also cut off the gas supply to Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh.

Comment – We have previously touched upon this and other Central Asian conflicts in our Updates, all in Russia's strategic backyard. He is losing influence and leverage across his erstwhile power zone because of his Ukrainian invasion and its unexpected longevity.

Russian defense chief says military factories working 'around the clock' - Factories in Russia producing military equipment are working nonstop and have withdrawn New Year holidays from employees, the head of state defense military conglomerate Rostec Sergei Chemezov said Monday.

"Rostec's factories involved in fulfilling state contracts are working almost around the clock and their staff are showing self-sacrifice and understanding in relation to the increased workload," Chemezov told state news agency TASS.

The Kremlin appears to be attempting to put Russia's economy on a war footing as the fighting in Ukraine shows no sign of coming to an end.

Comment – No mention was made of the acute and extensive need for maintenance and repair of vehicles currently damaged in the illegal invasion. Geolocated footage shows masses of Russian equipment and armored vehicles parked off in huge waiting zones.

Sanctions

Russia's economy ravaged by war as budget surplus completely wiped out - Russia's budget surplus more than halved last month in a sign of the impact Putin's invasion of Ukraine is having on his country's public finances.

Preliminary data from Russia's Finance Ministry showed the country's fiscal surplus shrank to 55 billion rubles (\$860 million) in the first nine months of the year, down from 137 billion roubles (\$2.15 billion), Bloomberg reported.

Public finances have been strained as the Russian government supports the economy during a recession and spends more to meet the needs of the military, the financial news outlet reported.

Expenditures in 2022 have surged by 19 percent compared with the same period last year and nearly double the pace of growth in budget revenue.

"Non-oil tax collection has improved, as VAT collection normalized," Russian economist Alexander Isakov told Bloomberg. "The Russian budget deficit will total 2.6 trillion rubles this year or 2 percent of GDP, provided non-oil revenues remain robust."

Olga Bychkova, an economist at Moody's Analytics, told Newsweek that the Russian government surplus is 30 times lower, when compared to the same period last year.

"Unfortunately, the Ministry hasn't published the details of the expenditures distribution since February, thus, we can't say with certainty which ministries or parts of the economy are financed more now," she told Newsweek.

"Nevertheless, we estimate that expenses on national defense, support of the economy amidst mounting international sanctions, and social transfers to cover for high inflation play the biggest role."

She predicted the government budget to post a modest surplus of 0.6% in 2022 on high energy prices but flip to a deep deficit of around 9% in 2023 due to limited growth, imports, and the opportunity to spend oil and gas revenues.

Comment – Russia is one of the world's largest providers of fertilizer, steel, aluminum and neon, among many others. Exports of fertilizer are dramatically down, steel has dropped substantially because raw materials imported from Ukraine have evaporated entirely, the same as with aluminum and neon is now zero whereas previously 80% of global supply came from Russia and Ukraine – the latter utterly destroyed the 2nd phase production factory in Mariupol when they razed the city in the early months of the war.

When adding these and the myriad other export products and commodities Russia enjoys high global supply percentages of, and where they have decimated the production and supply of, one can see the absolute stupidity of their planning and execution in this illegal invasion.

But again, he did fervently believe he could roll Ukraine over in a matter of days, or so he told China and Belarus.

Huge mistake.

French producer of LNG containers suspends operations in Russia - French liquefied natural gas containers manufacturer Gaztransport & Technigaz (GTT) has joined dozens of other international companies in announcing the suspension of its operations over Moscow's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine launched in February last year. The company said on January 3 that the decision was made after a thorough analysis of the European Union's sanctions imposed on Russia over its aggression against Ukraine.

European natural gas prices fall to lowest level since Ukraine war - Europe's wholesale natural gas prices fell on January 2 to their lowest level since Russia invaded Ukraine, which had driven them to a record high last year. A mild winter has enabled countries to tap less gas from stocks that were built up in anticipation of cuts in supplies from Russia, which was Europe's main supplier before the war. European countries filled up their gas-storage facilities and launched campaigns to encourage consumers to save on energy during the winter. Experts have warned that a cold snap could still send gas prices rising again.

Containment

Zelenskyy holds talks on further military support with UK PM - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says he has discussed further defence cooperation with the United Kingdom's prime minister, Rishi Sunak.

"We agreed to intensify our efforts to bring victory closer this year already. We already have concrete decisions for this," Zelenskyy tweeted after the pair's talks by phone.

A spokesperson for Sunak said the two leaders "discussed the abhorrent drone attacks on Ukraine in recent days." The British leader told Zelenskyy that Ukraine could "count on the UK to continue to support it for the long term," the spokesperson said.

U.K.'s Sunak promises long-term support to Ukraine after drone attacks - British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that he can count on Britain for support in the long run following recent drone attacks, Sunak's office said on January 3. "The leaders discussed the abhorrent drone attacks on Ukraine in recent days," the spokesperson said in a statement issued after the two leaders spoke earlier in the day. "The prime minister said Ukraine could count on the U.K. to continue to support it for the long term, as demonstrated by the recent delivery of more than 1,000 anti-air missiles."

Russian Mobilization

Soldiers' widows group calls on Putin to order major mobilisation - A patriotic group which supports the widows of Russian soldiers has called on Putin to order a large-scale mobilisation of millions of men and to close the borders to ensure victory in Ukraine.

Putin is under intense pressure to deliver victory in Ukraine more than 10 months since he sent troops as part of an operation he says was intended to defend Russians in eastern Ukraine.

"We ask our President, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, to allow the Russian Army to carry out a large-scale mobilisation," the Soldiers' Widows of Russia group said in a post on Telegram.

Comment – Caution needs to be exercised here as the Kremlin has a pattern of projecting pseudo opinion groups and opinions to reflect the Russian government in a positive light. Disinformation as they say.

It is conspicuous in that historically Russian widows and families have registered extreme dissent with the Russian government when deaths and injuries start rising. Putin previously held a "public" meeting with select widows who all commented positively on him and his decisions.

Geopolitics

Russia reaches out to new Israeli foreign minister - Eli Cohen's statement that Israel should talk less about the Russia-Ukrainian war was interpreted to mean that he would move closer to Moscow and be less critical.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov reached out the newly installed Foreign Minister Cohen to discuss ways to deepen the relationship between the two countries, despite tensions due to Moscow's war with Ukraine.

The two men spoke just one day after Cohen had received a call from United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The conversation follows the congratulatory call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and newly inaugurated Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu late last week.

Netanyahu and Putin have long had a strong relationship and prior to leaving office in 2021, he had attempted to stay neutral with respect to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

At issue, also for Israel has been Russia's presence on Israel's northern border. (**Comment** – At issue also are the numbers of people of Jewish descent still in Russia).

In the last year, Russia has closed the offices of the Jewish Agency and Moscow's exiled Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt has urged Russian Jews to leave to escape rising antisemitism.

Republican Senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina tweeted, that staying quiet about Russia's "criminal behavior does not age well."

Comment – With yesterday's Israeli visit to a holy site in Jerusalem, continuing settler invasions on Palestinian properties, burning of Palestinian businesses in areas sought by far-right Israeli settlers and a move to the right in the Netanyahu government, there are increasing statements of a growing schism in US/Israeli Jewish opinion and feeling.

Ukraine's envoy criticizes new Israeli FM for calling Russia's Lavrov - Ukraine's Ambassador to Israel Yevgen Korniychuk tells The Times of Israel that Foreign Minister Eli Cohen's call today with Sergey Lavrov, Russia's top diplomat, represents a change in Israeli policy.

"Israel's minister of foreign affairs hasn't spoken to Lavrov since the war started," he says, indicating that Kyiv is displeased that Cohen went ahead with the conversation. As foreign minister, Yair Lapid did not speak with Lavrov.

An Israeli official told The Times of Israel after the Cohen-Lavrov conversation "there is no change in Israel's policy."

Korniychuk adds that Israel's position on the Russian invasion is "unclear." "Unfortunately, we are getting no condemnation of the mass shelling of our civilians in recent months. Israel is unique in terms of our partners. It remains silent," he says.

Ukraine's envoy emphasizes that neither Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba nor Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky have asked to speak with Cohen.

Venezuela's Maduro says willing to work at normalizing US ties - Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro broke off relations with Washington in 2019, when the administration of then-president Donald Trump recognized Juan Guaido as Venezuela's 'interim president.'

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said in an interview on Sunday, January 1, that he was willing to work toward normalizing relations with the United States, despite continued sanctions crippling his country.

M. Maduro's remarks come days after the South American country's opposition voted to dissolve an "interim government" led by Juan Guaido, who had been recognized by many countries, including the US, as Venezuela's legitimate leader following disputed 2018 elections.

Comment – A sign of the changing international energy order. Venezuela enjoys some of the largest global oil reserves and is right on the US doorstep. Imminently logical and desirable.