

Conflict Update Day 378

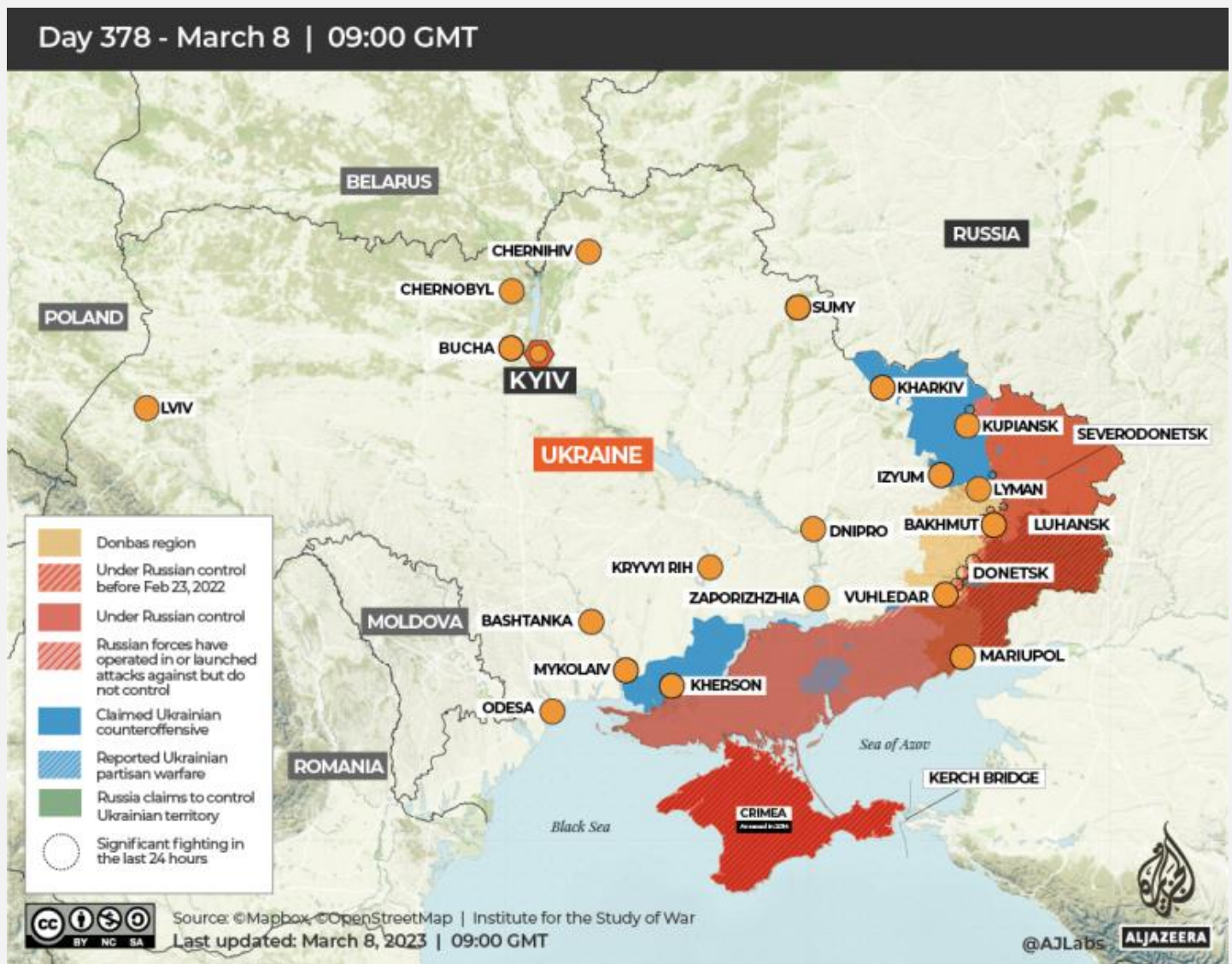
March 8th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 155,530 (+700) soldiers killed, 3,436 (+4) enemy tanks, 6,723 (+9) armored combat vehicles, 2,463 (+7) artillery systems, 488 (0) MLRS systems, 253 (+0) air defense systems, 303 (+0) warplanes, 289 (+0) helicopters, 2,098 (+3) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 873 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,330 (+7) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 236 (+0) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Bakhmut – Despite losses as reported in yesterday’s Update, reports are still being received that Russia may capture the city in the next week or so. Sources have been saying this for months now, so we’ll need to wait and see.

Earlier today the Wagner Group chief claimed to have captured the eastern part of the city, a far removed claim from a few days ago of encircling the area and demanding that Kyiv withdraw its forces.

It is pretty obvious that there is a lot of to and fro going on, witnessed by yesterday's high Russian death toll of over a thousand killed and approximately three thousand injured.



Ukrainian and Russian authorities confirm exchange of more than 200 prisoners of war - Russian and Ukrainian authorities on Tuesday confirmed a new prisoner exchange under which Russia has taken back 90 servicemen held captive by Ukraine, while another 130 Ukrainian defenders have been returned to Kiev.

Russia unlikely to capture significantly more territory this year, says US - Russia is unlikely to capture significantly more territory this year, according to the US director of national intelligence, Avril Haines.

She told a Senate hearing that the military will probably be unable to carry on its current level of fighting, even with the possible capture of Bakhmut, with fierce fighting continuing to take place in the city in eastern Ukraine.

After major setbacks and large battlefield losses, “We do not foresee the Russian military recovering enough this year to make major territorial gains,” she told a Senate hearing.

Nevertheless Putin “most likely calculates time works in his favour,” Haines said, according to Agence France Presse.

He likely believes that prolonging the war, with intermittent pauses in fighting, “may be his best remaining pathway to eventually securing Russian strategic interests in Ukraine, even if it takes years,” she said.

Haines, reporting on the sum of views in the broad US intelligence community, said that one year after invading Ukraine but failing in his primary goals for the operation, Putin probably now has a better understanding of the limitations of his forces. Moscow’s military power is now significantly constrained by troop losses and arms depletion that is exacerbated by trade restrictions and sanctions placed by the United States and allies, she noted.

Putin “appears to be focused on more modest military objectives now,” she told the Senate Intelligence Committee.


“If Russia does not initiate a mandatory mobilisation, and identify substantial third-party ammunition supplies, it will be increasingly challenging for them to sustain even the current level of offensive operations,” Haines said.



As a result, Russian forces “may fully shift” to holding and defending the territories they now occupy, she said.

Ukrainian tactics in Vuhledar – Ukrainian command sends out drones to reconnoiter Russian positions and units, noting rail movements and vehicular assembly patterns, informing them of impending enemy offensive actions.

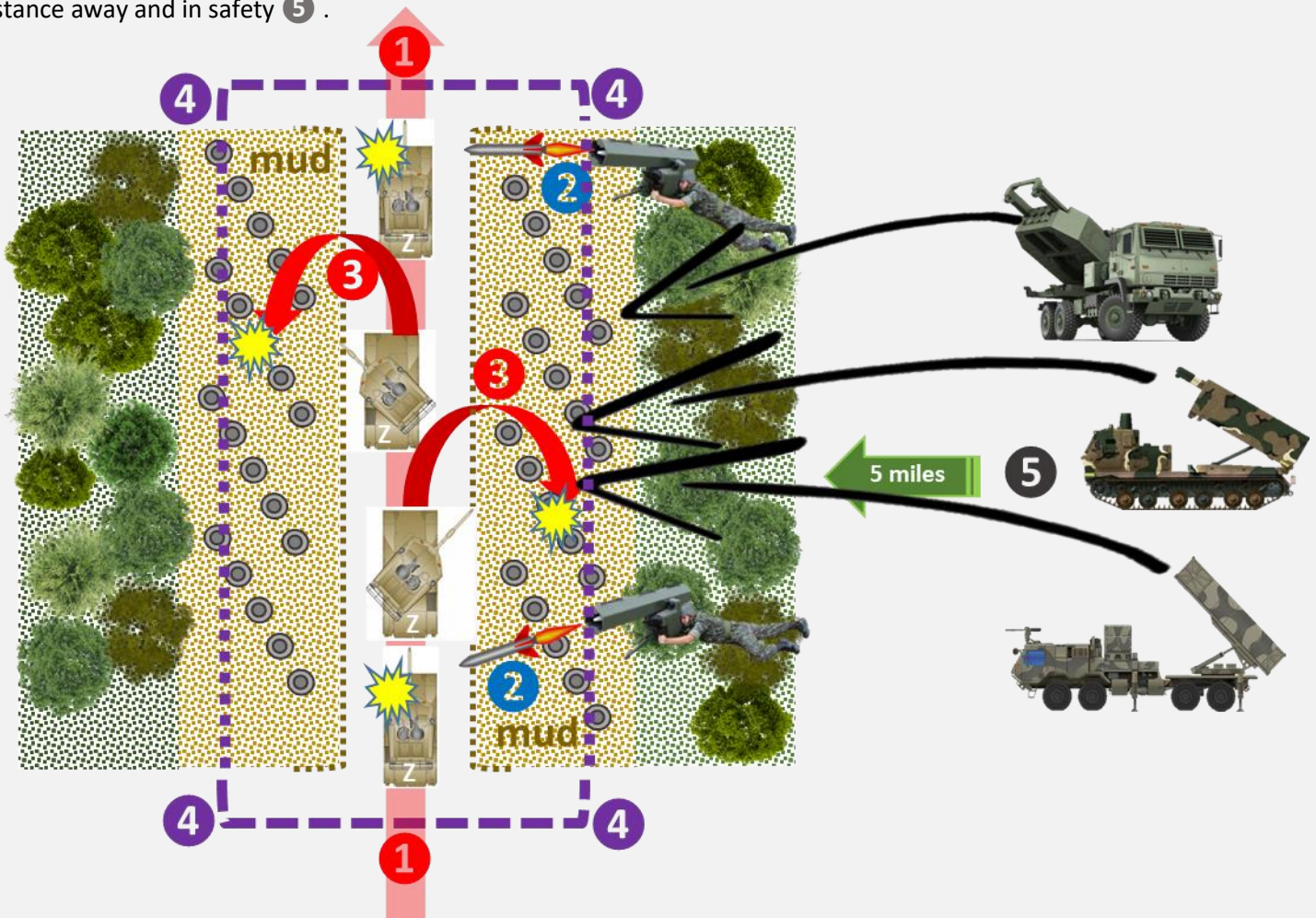
In Vuhledar, from drone intelligence, they calculated possible enemy strike routes, then set a trap by creating an ostensibly safe throughfare for them through a forest line. To create the semblance that this was the sole “safe” road, Ukraine Command deployed Ukrainian troop activity into other routes, cajoling and “pushing” Russian planners to utilize their (Ukrainian) “safe” passage **1**.

This was successful in that an entire Russian armored unit followed the “created route,” **1** proceeding line astern and directly into the “killing zone **4**.”

Ukrainian **Javelin missile operators** **2**, lying in wait, now unleashed anti-tank missiles at the first and last tanks .

Panicked, Russian tank operators now attempted to reverse or turn around **3**, driving their vehicles into anti-tank minefields  laid in the areas  inside the killing zone **4**, losing more tanks to mines buried in the mud.

Their vehicles now bogged down, the entire unit, including troop carriers with hundreds of soldiers, were stuck in the mud in the killing zone **4**, rendering them motionless and sitting ducks for Ukrainian artillery batteries located some distance away and in safety **5**.



More Ukrainian units claim raids on Russian soil; Kyiv disavows them - At a memorial service on Tuesday for four Ukrainians killed in 2022 while carrying out a raid on Russian territory, ordinary soldiers rubbed shoulders with volunteer fighters of the Brotherhood Battalion, to which those killed belonged.

The ceremony, at the historic gold-domed St Michael's cathedral in central Kyiv, underlined the unclear relationship between irregular groups and Ukraine's formal armed forces fighting against Russia.

The groups' role in the war is the focus of increasing scrutiny after several videos purporting to show cross-border sabotage raids into Russian territory surfaced and the Kremlin raised the alarm over the security threat.

Reuters has not independently verified the videos.

Putin has branded the saboteurs as "terrorists" and urged his security services to bolster defences along the frontier.

Comment – Fully understandable and "plausibly deniable."

Ukraine's new Stryker recon vehicles can see six miles away, and call in mortars and missiles - Video of the Strykers offloading at the port of Bremerhaven on Saturday confirms that, among the standard M1126 infantry carriers, the Stryker consignment also includes M1127 reconnaissance vehicles, pictured below.

The M1127s could prove critical as high-tech recon vehicles are a hard-hitting scouts. They problem: spotting your

The main difference eight-wheel M1126 reconnaissance packs a built-in set of precise day and calls the Long-Range System, or LRAS3.



the Ukrainian army deploys its new Stryker brigade. The Stryker brigade's cavalry—its fast-moving, far-seeing, help to solve an ages-old military enemy before they spot you.

between a 19-ton, Stryker and its M1127 variant is that the latter surveillance system—a night optics the U.S. Army Advanced Scout Surveillance

Peering through an LRAS3, the two-person crew of an M1127 can spot a target as far away as six miles and even determine its GPS coordinates. That's slightly farther than most tank crews can see with their own optics, and much farther than dismounted infantry can see with their Mark One Eyeballs.

The M1127, in other words, gives friendly troops a chance to strike the enemy before the enemy even knows they're there—and "truly bewilder the enemy," according to U.S. Army captain Andrew Chack, writing in a 2021 edition of *Armor*, the U.S. Army's official tank journal.

"Using all available capabilities, the cavalry troop can acquire, identify and destroy enemy targets with remarkable efficiency," Chalk wrote.

First, an M1127 crew or its five infantry scouts acquire a target. "Next, a secondary platform is cued to provide visual redundancy and to assist in identification," according to Chalk. This secondary platform could be another Stryker, additional dismounted scouts in an observation post or a small drone.

Having confirmed the target, the M1127 relays coordinates to the brigade's mortar and Javelin missile teams. "The mortar section relocates to engage with indirect fire," Chalk wrote. "Simultaneously, a dismounted Javelin team maneuvers to engage with its weapon system, as well."

The M1127 crew keeps watching as the mortars and missiles get in position. "By continually observing the target and reporting any significant change in posture, the observers allow both the mortars and the Javelin team to maneuver within the engagement range." For maximum destruction and confusion, the mortars and missiles open fire at the same time.

Attaching a few tanks to a Stryker brigade and pairing them with M1127s can result in even more sudden violence. These Stryker-tank hunter-killer teams combine long-range situational awareness with massive firepower.

Comment – This is significant as it unveils enemy supply points located behind but close to front line positions. Vital to know when engaged in offensive operations as combat draws belligerents closer together.

Ukraine heads into season of advantage over Russia - Putin reportedly had a strategy of using winter as a tool in his war in Ukraine. Not only did that plan not succeed, but now his forces will likely be put at a disadvantage by Ukraine's warmer weather.

"Mud is a factor, especially if one is stuck in a muddy trench or driving off-road or on an unpaved road," political science professor at Northwestern University William Reno told Newsweek.

Ukraine's mud is but one aspect of nature that will be working against Russia's military, according to military analysts.

After suffering numerous battlefield setbacks during large parts of his 2022 campaign in Ukraine, the Kremlin had planned on winter to help right his military's course, some observers have said. Putin reportedly counted on the cold weather freezing Ukraine's muddy terrain to allow for better tactical maneuvering by his troops, while artillery strikes targeted civilian infrastructure to take out sources of heat and electricity.

Russia managed to make some military gains in recent months, but none of those were likely the result of what turned out to be a milder-than-usual winter in Ukraine. Now, Ukraine's notoriously fertile terrain—which allowed the country to become one of the world's top exporters of grain—is set to turn increasingly muddy.

John Spencer, a retired U.S. Army major and chair of Urban Warfare Studies at the Madison Policy Forum, told Newsweek that there's no downplaying the significance Ukraine's mud can have in the war.

"It has a direct impact on vehicles' ability to get off the roads, spread out [and] get into tactical formation. It has an impact on vehicle maintenance, which we know Russia really struggles with...You try to get a vehicle through mud, it breaks down along with getting stuck," he said.

Spencer said Russian military will be forced to using mostly roads to avoid the muddy fields, leaving them more vulnerable. (**See above graphic** on page 3 as to how Ukrainian Command uses the weather to its advantage).

"I think that the greater issue is that as the mud increases, the routes that the Russians can take—both to move around or even resupply themselves—get much more constrained," he said. "As mud limits the roads you can take, that increases the likelihood of attacks."

Spencer, who visited Ukraine in 2022 during the invasion, also said Putin's troops don't seem as well-equipped for the weather as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's military.

"Super cold is not as dangerous as cold and wet," he said. "Mud increases the moisture on the feet inside boots, and that causes injuries to the troops." "Russia may have a lot of men, but it doesn't have a lot of high-quality military equipment," Spencer said, adding that the West is providing such equipment to Ukraine.

Comment – We know from reports that Russian troops have been forced to purchase their own protective equipment for winter, whereas the Canadian government has equipped Ukrainian soldiers with modern, proven winter kit from Canadian Arctic military reserves, suitable for any of the coldest regimes anywhere.

Containment

Trudeau announces further supports for Ukraine - Canada will extend the Operation Unifier mission to provide engineering training in Ukraine until at least October, and Canadian medical trainers will be sent to help Ukrainian forces with combat medical skills.

The US is now testing Ukrainian pilots on F-16s - The news comes as speculation grows the Biden administration will send Ukraine F-16 fighter jets to counter Russian forces.

As Ukraine's top allies are calling on the U.S. to send them F-16s to counter Russian air supremacy in the ongoing war, the Pentagon now says it's assessing the fighter jet skills of two Ukrainian pilots in Arizona.

"Two Ukrainian pilots are currently in Tucson for a familiarization event for U.S. and Ukrainian pilots," said a Department of Defense spokesperson in a statement to VICE News. "This event allows us to better help Ukrainian pilots become more effective pilots and better advise them on how to develop their own capabilities."

The Pentagon acknowledged the curious timing of the two Ukrainians training in a stateside Air Force facility, but made it clear that "there are no updates to provide regarding F-16's to Ukraine."

Last week a top DOD official told a congressional committee that President Biden and his administration had not yet decided on whether to send F-16 fighters to Kyiv or even to train their pilots. Over a year ago, when Russia unleashed its full-blown invasion of Ukraine, the American security and intelligence establishment roundly saw the transfer of fighter jets to Kyiv as risking a nuclear confrontation with the Kremlin.

DOD didn't count out future training exercises involving Ukrainian personnel.

"There are no immediate plans to increase the number of pilots beyond the two currently in Tucson but we're not closing the door on future opportunities."

Slovak minister says 'neutral' Hungary also trains Ukrainian soldiers - Hungary is also training Ukrainian soldiers, said Slovak Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad' on Monday, debunking the neutral approach to Russia's war Viktor Orban's government has asserted so far.

Nad' spoke to Foreign Minister Rastislav Káčer about the war in Ukraine at an event also attended by a pro-Russian group, whose members shouted loudly in the room trying to hinder the two ministers' conversation, Telex reports.

In response to one of the attendees shouting that Hungary, as a neighboring country, is not supporting Ukraine, Nad' said: "The fact that you don't know about this and that there is propaganda being spread about them not helping is one thing. But did you know that Ukrainian soldiers are being trained on their territory [Hungary]?", Nad' replied.

His comments have created a storm in Hungary as the government has continuously asserted its neutral stance towards the conflict, saying it must not get involved.

Sanctions

Huge budget deficit is building up in Russia's economy - Moscow's oil and gas revenues plummeted 46% in January-February.

According to the Russian Ministry of Finance, federal budget revenues in the first two months of 2023 were down 25% compared with the same period in 2022. A total of 1,263 trillion rubles entered the state treasury in the period.

Parallel to the shrinking revenues comes a significant increase in state spending. Budget expenditure in January-February amounted to 5,744 trillion rubles, up 52% year-on-year.

The figures show that a major budget deficit of 2,581 trillion rubles, or about 45%, has built up over only two months.

The lower revenues are related with Russia's increasingly troublesome sales of oil and gas. According to the Finance Ministry, revenues from the petroleum industry amounted to 947 billion rubles, a decrease of 46% compared with the same period in 2022. The drop follows the price cap on Russian introduced by western countries on 5th of February, as well as the halt in natural gas sales by pipeline to the EU.

Traditionally, revenues from sales of crude oil, petroleum products, and natural gas have accounted for about a half of Russia's federal budget.

But also other sectors bring less money to the Russian treasury. The so-called none-petroleum revenues shrunk by 9% year-on-year, much of it reportedly caused by a drop in collected income taxes.

Budget troubles now loom over Russia's economy, and the federal government will find it increasingly hard to finance the onslaught on Ukraine.

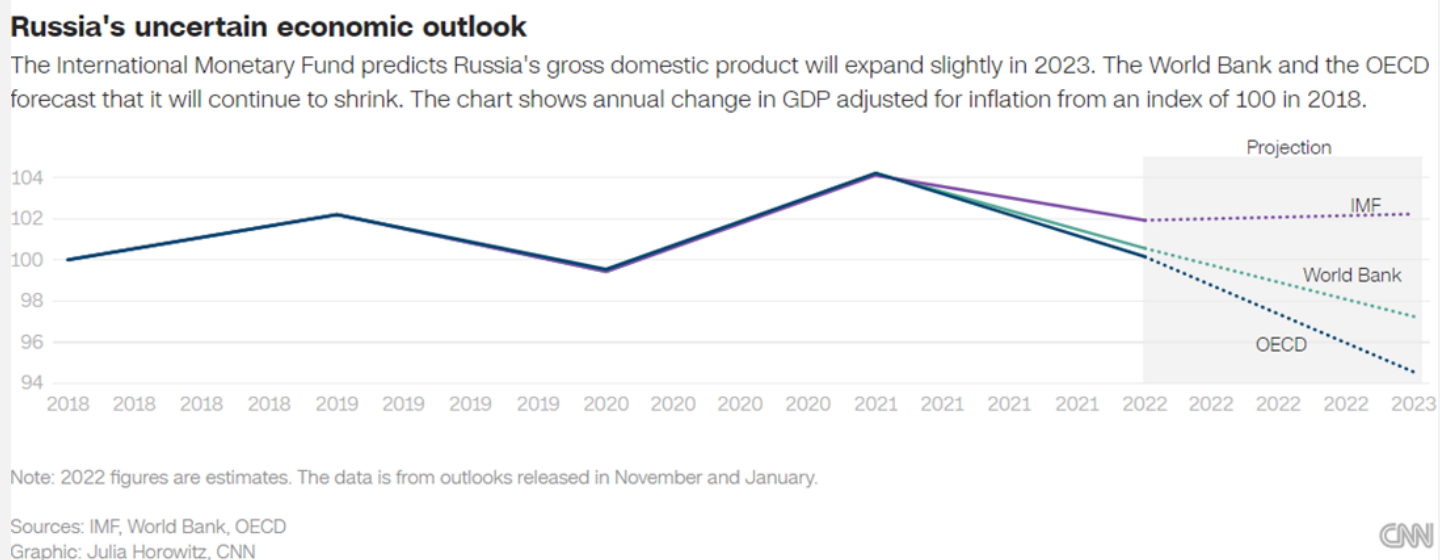
Ukraine war will have 'devastating' consequences for Russia's economy - The International Monetary Fund has drawn criticism for forecasting that Russia will see stronger economic growth this year than either the United Kingdom or Germany, despite rising pressure from Western sanctions.

But Kristalina Georgieva, the IMF's managing director, told CNN's Poppy Harlow that the economic outlook for Russia beyond 2023 is "quite devastating."

"When you take our projections over a medium term, what they mean is Russia's economy] shrinking by at least 7%," Georgieva said in an interview that aired Wednesday.

In January, the IMF projected that Russia's economy would expand by 0.3% this year and 2.1% the next. That was much more optimistic than recent forecasts from both the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Economists at those groups have penciled in contractions of 3.3% and 5.6% in 2023, respectively.

Even Russia's own central bank, which extended emergency capital controls for another six months on Monday, has said gross domestic product might contract by 1% this year.



Georgieva told CNN that Russia's economy would suffer over time as workers emigrated and access to technology was cut off, and as sanctions on its vast energy industry took a toll.

"This year what we reflect on is that Russia has managed to direct some of [its] oil sales beyond the markets of the European Union," she said, referring to Russia's success in rerouting crude shipments to China and India. "That is not going to be a lasting impact for the Russian economy."

"We don't see Russia in any way benefiting from what they have caused to Ukraine and to themselves."

Four former bankers with a now-closed Swiss affiliate of a major Russian bank have gone on trial - over allegations that they didn't properly check accounts opened in the name of a Russian cellist linked to Putin.

The one-day trial in Zurich district court today stems from information about secretive financial flows revealed in the Panama Papers leaks in 2016, that implicated musician and Putin's childhood friend Sergei Roldugin. It took years for prosecutors to unravel the web of money and bring the case to court, AP reports.

The trial opens a rare window into allegations from the Panama Papers that a member of Putin's circle of friends helped funnel millions abroad and that financial employees may have turned a blind eye to such inflows. Putin has denied the accusations.

Both before and since Putin ordered forces into Ukraine, western nations have imposed sanctions against oligarchs and others with close ties to his government, including Roldugin. The US Treasury describes Roldugin as "part of a system that manages Putin's offshore wealth."

The former Gazprombank employees – three Russian-born and one Swiss-born who cannot be named under Swiss law – are charged with failing to adequately check whether Roldugin, who was a client of the bank from 2014 to 2016, actually owned the assets in the accounts.

Documents filed when the accounts were opened listed expected transactions of 11.5m Swiss Francs (\$12.2m). The indictment doesn't indicate how much of that may have arrived at the bank.

It is "publicly known that Russian President Putin officially has an income of just over 100,000 Swiss francs and is not wealthy, but in fact has enormous assets managed by people close to him," according to the indictment.

The document says Gazprombank maintained the accounts despite "abundant" media reports about Roldugin's relationship to Putin, including that he was godfather to one of Putin's daughters.

Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

'Critical' Black Sea grain deal be extended, says UN general secretary - The UN general secretary, António Guterres, and the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, have met in Kyiv and have jointly called for an extension of the deal with Moscow that has allowed Kyiv to export grain via the Black Sea during Russia's invasion, without any threat being posed to the ships. Guterres said it was "critical" for the deal to be continued.

Zelenskyy said after talks with Guterres that the Black Sea grain initiative was necessary for the world. Guterres underlined the importance of the deal to global food security and food prices.

The 120-day deal, initially brokered by the UN and Turkey in July and extended in November, will be renewed on 18 March if no party objects.

Russia signalled obstacles to its own agricultural exports needed to be removed before it would let the deal continue.

Ukraine war focuses China military minds on Starlink, US missiles - Chinese researchers have scrutinized the effects of US weapons in Ukraine to learn lessons for possible future conflict.

China needs the ability to shoot down low-Earth-orbit Starlink satellites and defend its tanks and helicopters against shoulder-fired Javelin missiles, Chinese military researchers have concluded, after studying Russia's struggles in the Ukraine war as a means to learn lessons for possible future conflict with the United States.

A review of almost 100 articles in more than 20 defence journals has revealed an effort across China's military-industrial complex to scrutinize the impact of US weapons and technology in Ukraine that could be deployed against Chinese forces in a possible future conflict, Reuters reported on Wednesday.

Some of the Chinese journal articles stress Ukraine's relevance given the risk of a regional conflict that pits Chinese forces against the US and its allies, possibly over Taiwan.

The Chinese-language journals, which reflect the work of hundreds of Chinese researchers across a network of People's Liberation Army (PLA)-linked universities, state-owned weapons manufacturers and military intelligence think tanks, are far more candid in their assessments of Russian shortcomings in warfare than China's official position on Moscow's war, which it has refrained from criticizing.

Take out Starlink

Half a dozen papers by PLA researchers highlight Chinese concern at the role of Starlink, a satellite network developed by Elon Musk's US-based space exploration company SpaceX, in securing the communications of Ukraine's military amid Russian missile attacks on the country's power grid.

"The excellent performance of 'Starlink' satellites in this Russian-Ukrainian conflict will certainly prompt the US and Western countries to use 'Starlink' extensively" in possible hostilities in Asia, said a September article co-written by researchers at the Army Engineering University of the PLA.

The authors deemed it "urgent" for China – which aims to develop its own similar satellite network – to find ways to shoot down or disable Starlink.

New report suggests pro-Ukraine groups behind Nord Stream attacks - NYT says new intelligence reviewed by US officials suggests that opponents of Vladimir Putin were responsible for attacks on gas pipelines.

Intelligence reviewed by US officials suggested a pro-Ukrainian group carried out the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in 2022, the New York Times has reported. There was no evidence President Zelenskiy, or his top lieutenants were involved, or that the perpetrators were acting at the direction of any Ukrainian government officials, said the report, citing US officials.

China blames Ukraine crisis on 'invisible hand' - At wide-ranging press conference, Foreign Minister Qin Gang also describes Taiwan as a 'red line' in relations with US.

The Ukraine crisis seems to be driven by an invisible hand pushing for the protraction and escalation of the conflict, according to China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang.

The "invisible hand" is "using the Ukraine crisis to serve certain geopolitical agendas," Qin said at a press conference on the sidelines of the country's annual parliamentary meeting in Beijing, without specifying who he was referring to.

Comment – Precisely aligned with Moscow's position – and patently obvious that it is seeking to enact an agreement of sorts in order to contain present Kremlin territorial gains in Ukraine. There does appear to be a concerted message from these two parties in positioning Russia as the peace monger without blame for instigating this war of occupation.

The increasing tempo of Chinese rhetoric tells me that things are not going too well for Putin and the Kremlin, matching their feverish attempt(s) to get ahead of Ukrainian Spring offensive efforts by attempting to penetrate further into the Donbas in Bakhmut and Vuhledar.

China

China's hidden intentions now reaching surface - John Bolton, former President Trump's nation security adviser, told Newsmax that China previously hid its true global ambitions, but they are now coming to the surface.

Bolton yesterday said Chinese President Xi is "laying a propaganda basis" for expansion, which Beijing "has already been doing for the last 15 years."

"This is a way for him to say, 'I wouldn't have done this but for the United States,' which is just flatly untrue," Bolton said of Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang's recent comment the U.S. needs to "hit the brakes" or risk conflict.

"This is part of what they call in China 'wolf-warrior diplomacy.' It's a very aggressive style of rhetoric and confrontation," he continued, suggesting it is "a reflection" of how confident China is.

Under former Chinese President Deng Xiaoping, Bolton proposed, China began market reforms to build up its military and engaged in a policy of "hide and bide: hide your capabilities and bide your time."

"So, it sounded like China was engaged in a peaceful rise. Everything was fine. People in the United States thought there was no political risk to invest in China," Bolton explained.

"Now, when the mask comes off, and we get wolf-warrior diplomacy," he continued.

"People say, 'My goodness! Relations have worsened between Beijing and Washington.' Absolutely not true. They were bad before. We just didn't get it."

Putin & Russia

Russian state pundits admit to Ukraine's power on battlefield - Russian pundits recently admitted that Ukraine's defensive effort on the battlefield is "powerful" amid the ongoing war, which began its second year.

Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine's minister of internal affairs, posted a video captioned "Russian propagandists praise the Ukrainian Armed Forces." The video shows a segment from the Russian state TV show Soloviev Live, hosted by Sergey Mardan.

In the video, one person can be heard saying "our respected experts say that the enemy defense is powerful. It is true," and Mardan is seen agreeing with the statement.

"It relies first and foremost on effectively prepared fortifications, including fields and wooded areas. It is most effective in populated areas," the guest said. "These fortifications, engineering preparation of the enemy is good, we should admit that. We are really dealing with clever, trained and equipped enemy."

Comment – Russia has been defended by Ukraine – and Belarus – for centuries from invading forces. This is a staple and constant factor in their surviving multiple invasions and attempts at the overthrow of the Russian state. It should not come as a surprise that Ukrainian soldiers are formidable operators, they have been for hundreds of years – and more importantly, now they are fighting an existential battle for their country, not for Moscow.

Putin's top ally in Europe disappoints him once again - Hungary, the EU country most aligned with Putin, is set to make a move that goes against the Russian president's agenda.

Yesterday, Deputy Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament Csaba Hende, told reporters that his country is expected to vote in favor of Sweden joining NATO. Allowing the country into the military bloc would be a major blow against Putin, who has cited prevention of NATO expansion as one of his reasons for starting the war in Ukraine.

Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán has long been a staunch ally of the Russian leader. He has publicly pushed back against EU sanctions designed to punish Moscow for the war in Ukraine and has tried to thwart NATO's military support of Kyiv.

Orbán has previously said that Hungary, which is a NATO member, had reservations about the recent bids by Sweden and Finland to join the alliance. However, Hende—who is in Orbán's right-wing Fidesz party—now says Hungary supports at least one of those bids.

"We made it clear that the Hungarian government, the Hungarian president, the prime minister and most of the Hungarian parliamentarians clearly support Swedish NATO membership," Hende told the Swedish news agency TT, according to the Associated Press.

“You’ve been screwed”- Russian inmates rebel and flee from commanders - The demented prison-recruitment scheme top Russian military brass are using to find fresh cannon fodder for the war against Ukraine apparently isn't going so well: 11 inmates are on the run in Donetsk while their fellow recruits have been tossed into basements for refusing to fight.

That's according to the independent outlet Ostorozhno, Novosti, which released damning leaked audio on Tuesday that captures the unfolding chaos.

About 70 inmates are being held against their will in a basement in Donetsk after a conflict with their commanders went off the rails, one inmate told the outlet. He said he and 10 others had managed to flee during the mayhem, but now they're terrified the military will track them down, execute them, and list them as missing so the circumstances of their deaths will be kept under wraps and their families will never receive compensation.

"If you refuse to go fight, people from Wagner will come and we'll shoot you," the inmate recalled being told.

Just before the prisoners' escape, a man identified as a Russian Defense Ministry official was caught on tape trying to convince the group of angry inmates that they better follow orders.

A 10-minute clip shared by Ostorozhno, Novosti was reportedly surreptitiously recorded after the group of inmates recruited for the war effort refused to storm Ukrainian positions in the Donbas, and apparently began to catch wind of the fact that they were simply seen as an easily expendable resource to carry out human-wave style attacks.

"You were given a task yesterday, and you refused," an unnamed representative of the Defense Ministry says as he scolds them. "I haven't scared you with anything yet. Why would I need to scare you? I want to ask you, why didn't you go carry out the task?"

"Those before you went through the exact same thing, there were 75 people—" the official says, before an inmate cuts him off and yells, "Of whom only 11 people remained? I was with them in the hospital!"

The inmates can be heard protesting that the contracts they were initially shown upon recruitment didn't contain the same terms that they were now being told of.

One of the inmates from the group, who called his enlistment a "monstrous mistake," told Ostorozhno, Novosti the military had tried to toss the inmates onto the battlefield with next to no training.

After they protested, he said, a military officer candidly told them all, "You've been screwed."

The Battle for Bakhmut Is Wearing Russia Down - High losses suffered by Wagner Group mercenaries in the battle for the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut will undermine Russia's ability to stage further offensives in its invasion, according to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW).

There was speculation over whether Kyiv would withdraw from the fight for the Donetsk city that Wagner forces have been heavily involved in, but Zelenskyy insisted on Monday that his troops would stay. (**Comment** – In fact, Ukrainian units inflicted heavy casualties on Wagner formations in the earlier part of this week, with a significant number of those killed reflected in the kill number of yesterday of 1,060).

One unnamed NATO official told CNN that for every Ukrainian soldier killed defending the city, Russian forces lose at least five. The ISW said on Monday that such high losses had deteriorated Russia's capacity for additional offensives and would give Ukraine a chance to seize the initiative.

The precarious future of Russian democracy - When the new Russia emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was widely expected to embark on a democratic transition. In the then dominant Western narrative, it had no alternative if it hoped to thrive as a major power in the twenty-first century.

Liberal democracy had prevailed in the titanic ideological struggle of the twentieth century, vanquishing communism as a viable form of political organization in the Cold War less than fifty years after it had crushed fascism in the Second World War. Russian president Boris Yeltsin and his lieutenants seemingly shared that perspective, vowing to build a strong, democratic Russia.

Today, the dream of a democratic future has evaporated. The country's autocratic past has reasserted itself under Putin. Legislatures and courts from the national to the local level have been stripped of whatever political autonomy they once might have had. (**Comment** – Watching Netanyahu?).

The media have largely been turned into mouthpieces for Kremlin propaganda. Civil society has been eviscerated. Opposition leaders have been forced into exile or imprisoned, their organizations ruthlessly gutted. Elections are neither free nor fair.

What went wrong?

Before proceeding, it is necessary to dispel one widespread myth about Russia's democratic journey. Putin did not reverse the democratic experiment; he only quickened the pace of the authoritarian revival. The reversal began under his predecessor, even though Yeltsin was initially hailed in the West as a great democratic reformer. In retrospect, the high point of Russia's democratization effort was reached in the last years of the Soviet Union.

It was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev who introduced "real politics" into Russia by stripping the Communist Party of its monopoly on legitimate political activity. He ended censorship for all practical purposes. He introduced competitive elections. To this day, the elections of the late Soviet period—to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies in 1989, the Russian Congress of People's Deputies in 1990, and the Russian presidency in 1991—remain the freest and fairest in Russian history.

They are also the ones that garnered the greatest enthusiasm, as Russians hoped to create a government that was truly accountable to the people. Gorbachev's reforms, however, led to the collapse of the country, largely because he could not master the political forces of reaction and radicalism he had unleashed.

Yeltsin did not pick up where Gorbachev left off and do him one better, as the contemporary Western narrative claimed. Rather, he presided over the crumbling of the central state apparatus, as a bitter struggle erupted over the division of power and property in a country suddenly freed from the political and economic shackles of the Soviet totalitarian system.

During the process, vast segments of the government were privatized for personal gain. Yeltsin defeated the legislature in a power struggle and then instituted a constitutional reform that created a powerful presidency that Putin would subsequently exploit to hasten Russia down the autocratic path. In short, the chaos of the Yeltsin period created a simulacrum of freedom but precluded laying the foundation of a well-ordered democratic polity. Putin restored order but in an antidemocratic fashion.

Democracy Averted

Why, then, did democracy fail to take root in post-Soviet Russia? The answer lies in Russia's structure and the character of its would-be democratic leaders.

Structurally, in the first post-Soviet decade Russian society lacked the building blocks of a true democracy. The atomized population of the Soviet period was slow to consolidate into classes and socioeconomic groups with well-defined interests that could be articulated in the political realm.

The political elite was largely drawn from the second and third echelon of the old Soviet elite, with no principled commitment to democracy. The Soviet professional classes—teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers—that yearned for a more open society were ravaged by Yeltsin's radical economic reforms. As a result, politics was dominated by so-called Kremlin clans, political-economic coalitions centered on leading political figures that controlled major financial and industrial resources, media assets, and security forces. They struggled over the division of power and property with little concern for democratic niceties.

As the Russian economy began to recover in the 2000s, professional classes grew in size. But their democratic potential was impaired by the lack of well-protected property rights that would have provided the independent base of wealth and power needed to challenge the state.

To the contrary, the majority of the population remains directly or indirectly dependent on the state for their well-being—they work for the government or state-owned enterprises or nominally private enterprises that serve the state, they live in one-company towns that rely on government orders for survival, or they are dependent on state transfers to maintain their standard of living. (**Comment** – Far-flung provinces and republics within the Russian Federation are completely dependent upon Moscow largess for financial survival. This way the Kremlin ensures subservience and obedience).

The structural impediments to democratic development were reinforced by the inadequacies of would-be democratic leaders. From the moment the new Russia emerged, internecine, often petty, struggles have prevented them from uniting for electoral purposes. By the early 2000s, this behavior prevented their parties from gaining enough votes to cross the threshold for representation in the Duma or to win regional or municipal elections.

Their electoral appeal was further diminished by their inability to connect with broad segments of the population, for which, as intellectuals, they often had little more than disdain. They spoke of lofty ideals, but rarely of how they could help people deal with their practical needs. Arguments that socio-economic difficulties were a consequence of limited democracy and inadequate reforms fell on deaf ears, as an increasing majority of the people came to associate the profound systemic crisis of the 1990s with the democratic reforms urged by the West.

The Navalny Threat

Alexey Navalny is that rare opposition figure who could break out of this mold and connect democratic longings with popular discontent. He did this by exposing the deep corruption of high-ranking state officials—he denounced the ruling party as a “party of crooks and thieves.” That resonated with a broad segment of society by providing it with a credible explanation of its plight. Blessed with extraordinary organizational and media skills, he created a country-wide political network and proved particularly adept at attracting young people. He used those skills to organize country-

wide protests at a scale not seen since the first years of post-Soviet Russia. He also introduced the idea of “smart voting”—providing support for the opposition candidate, regardless of party affiliation, mostly likely to defeat a Kremlin favorite—that enabled opposition figures to win seats in regional legislatures, including in Moscow itself.

Navalny may have posed no immediate threat, but he created a scalable model that could eventually challenge the Kremlin’s domination of the political system. That is why Putin moved against him; following a failed assassination attempt, Navalny was given a long sentence in a penal colony, and the war in Ukraine provided the pretext for dispersing Navalny’s grassroots political organization.

Navalny’s fate underscores the vast coercive powers of the Russian state, which is one final reason why Russia’s democratic transition failed. There are a few signs that those powers are about to atrophy, but for the moment, Russian democracy appears to be a distant dream.

Article from the CFR dated yesterday.

‘Unjustified losses.’ a regiment of demoralized Russian draftees begs Putin for mercy—but Putin isn’t listening - As Russian losses in Ukraine deepened last year, the Kremlin drafted hundreds of unfit, middle-age men in Irkutsk Oblast in southern Siberia, gave them a month of cursory training and formed a new army unit—the 1439th Regiment.

In a series of disastrous assaults on Ukrainian positions in Avdiivka—in eastern Ukraine’s Donbas region—in late February and early March, the 1439th Regiment suffered devastating casualties.

“There is nothing left of the regiment,” one 1439th draftee told Radio Free Europe.

The 1439th Regiment’s tragic tale is illustrative of a wider crisis. Having lost many soldiers killed and wounded in Ukraine in the first year of the wider war, the Russian army increasingly relies on 300,000 conscripts it drafted last year.

Poorly-equipped, ambivalently led and—if the 1439th’s experience is any indication—demoralized. But don’t count on the draftee’s dire predicament to motivate the Kremlin to change how it generates and deploys its forces.

The 1439th Regiment’s beleaguered troopers and their relatives repeatedly have pleaded with Putin for mercy. He has ignored them.

The 1439th fights as part of the 1st Slavic Brigade, which belongs to the army of the separatist DPR. The brigade rides in outdated T-72 tanks and BMP-1 fighting vehicles supported by equally outdated 2S1 howitzers.

The 1st Slavic Brigade in late 2022 captured the village of Opytne, a mile west of Donetsk. With the ruins of Opytne under Russian control, the brigade in recent months has turned its attention to Avdiivka, two miles farther north.

The Ukrainians were willing to trade Opytne for time and an opportunity to bleed Russian and separatist forces. Avdiivka is another matter. The Ukrainian military clearly intends to hold the city. Elements of the Ukrainian army’s 53rd Mechanized Brigade and the Ukrainian navy’s 36th Marine Brigade have dug in south of Avdiivka. The army’s 55th Artillery Brigade lends fire support.

Ukrainian defenses around Avdiivka are daunting. Too daunting, it turns out, for the 1st Slavic Brigade and its Siberian draftees from the 1439th Regiment.

Losses were so bad after a series of failed assaults that draftees and their wives four times recorded direct appeals to Putin for relief. “We were sent to the combat line without ... military IDs, without ammunition, without proper training,” the draftees said in one statement.

“We ask you to take us out of the zone of contact and sort it out—[deal] with the people responsible for this outrage, who have sent unprepared mobilized men to the front line—[and ask you] to avoid large, unjustified losses,” the 1439th told Putin.

The appeals didn’t work. Military officials confiscated the phones and arrested two troopers for sedition. In what might be an escalation of the regimental protest, or might be an effort to appease the restive regiment, the governor of Irkutsk on Friday traveled to the front to deliver to the 1439th six tons of vans, generators, winter clothes and drones.

It’s not clear how much combat power the 1439th Regiment has left. But the battle for Avdiivka isn’t over. Unless the 1439th Regiment really has disintegrated, its awful plight continues.

Article by David Axe in Forbes dated yesterday.