

# Conflict Update # 30

April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022

## Conflict Assessment

**Chemical usage?** - The United States and its partners will likely be unable to verify Ukrainian claims of Russian use of chemical weapons in Mariupol, a location the Kremlin may have intentionally chosen due to international observers' lack of access to the area.

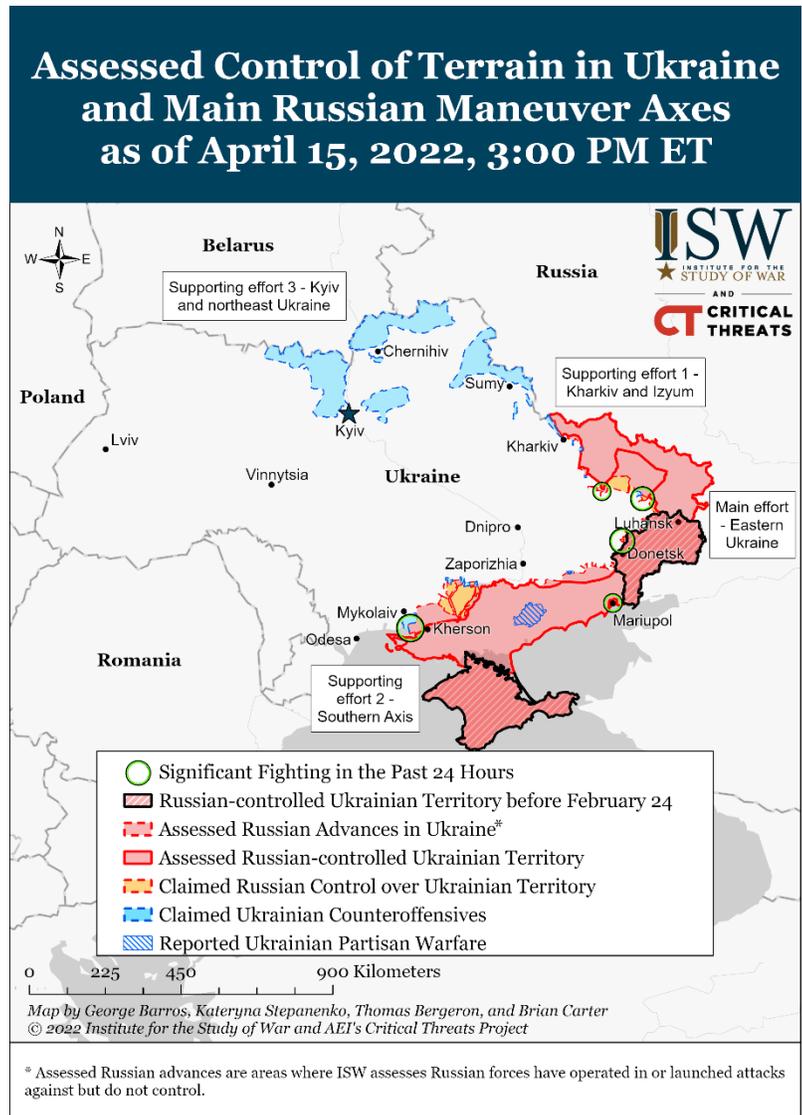
However, the Kremlin has previously set informational conditions to blame Ukrainian forces for Russian-conducted attacks in eastern Ukraine and retains the capability to conduct chemical warfare. The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed it had "reliable data" on April 7 that Ukraine was planning a chemical provocation against Russia and has repeatedly and falsely accused Ukraine of developing chemical and biochemical weapons in alleged US-funded biolabs throughout the country.

**Russian forces** continued small-scale, tactical attacks on the Izyum and Severodonetsk axes; additional reinforcements to date have not enabled any breakthroughs of Ukrainian defenses.

The Russian military appears to be carrying out an approach in eastern Ukrainian similar to its failed efforts north of Kyiv in early March—continuing to funnel small groups of forces into unsuccessful attacks against Ukrainian defensive positions without taking the operational pause that is likely necessary to prepare for a more successful offensive campaign.

**Russian Forces Blocked Near Donetsk, Say Ukrainian Troops** - Ukrainian forces say they repelled Russian armor attempting to break through to the village of Krasnohorivka in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region. A Ukrainian soldier told RFE/RL on April 13 how his unit stopped the advance of seven Russian tanks attempting to establish a corridor west of the city of Donetsk.

**Mariupol** - Russian forces continued to grind down Ukrainian defenses in southwestern and eastern Mariupol, though ISW cannot confirm any major new territorial changes in the past 24 hours. Ukrainian defenders reported that the situation is "deteriorating," and Russian forces are deploying additional artillery and heavy weapons.



**Eastern Ukraine** - Russian forces continued unsuccessful daily attacks against Rubizhne, Popasna, and Marinka and heavy shelling along the line of contact in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks from Izyum toward both Slovyansk and Barvinkove.

**Destroying bridges** – Russian forces rely heavily on road and rail bridges to move troops and equipment around. Ukrainian forces continue to destroy such bridges, thwarting enemy movements.

**Russian warnings to US** – Russia has warned the US to cease arming and training Ukrainian forces. The mere warning seems to indicate a Russian awareness of the efficacy of US arms and training, particularly if (unconfirmed by regularly coming in) reports of American-made Harpoon missiles were used by recently trained and armed Ukrainian forces in sinking the flagship Mokba prove to be true.

**False flags** - The Kremlin is likely falsely blaming Ukrainian forces for planning or conducting provocations in areas where Russian forces intend to commit or have already committed atrocities. The Kremlin likely seeks to introduce doubt into future attributions of war crimes and to diminish global support for Ukraine by blaming Ukrainian forces for crimes already committed by Russian forces. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry reported on April 13 that the Kremlin ordered Russian forces use mobile crematoriums to destroy evidence of civilian deaths, and Russian forces will likely take additional measures moving forward to hide evidence of their violence against civilians.

Russian news outlet Pravda amplified claims on April 11 that Ukrainian forces were ordered to execute civilians in Rubizhne, where heavy fighting has taken place. That false claim indicates that Russian forces may be killing civilians in Rubizhne and intend to blame any civilian deaths on Ukrainian defenders.

Kremlin Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Maria Zakharova warned on April 13 about the plans of Ukrainian authorities to organize a provocation in Sumy, from which Russian forces were withdrawing as of April 14. This claim indicates that Ukrainian forces retaking Sumy may uncover additional evidence of Russian atrocities against civilians.

It appears that as Russian forces withdraw from contested areas, they are issuing statements of “Ukrainian provocations” – provocations are what the Russians term accusations of atrocities being found upon their withdrawals.

Unconfirmed reports are coming in that Russian soldiers are exhuming mass graves in Mariupol and sending bodies to a crematorium vehicle.

**Reframing the war** - The Kremlin is reframing the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a Western war against Russia in a likely effort to maintain Russian domestic acceptance of the war. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that the purpose of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is to end the “reckless” US expansion towards global dominance on April 11, diverging from the Kremlin’s typical narrative that it invaded Ukraine to “denazify” the government. Lavrov claimed that the United States and the European Union used the Russian military operation in Ukraine as a pretext for unprecedented aggression against Russia in order to subordinate Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin echoed Lavrov’s claims on April 12, stating that the United States is fighting Russia for world domination via Ukrainian proxies in a conflict “more complex than the Cold War.” Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov warned that Russia will treat any US or NATO military shipments to Ukraine as legitimate military targets on April 13, threatening potential military escalation against the West. Kremlin efforts to rhetorically frame the war in Ukraine as a struggle with the United States and its allies are unlikely to deter ongoing Western support for Ukraine. The Kremlin instead likely intends to maintain Russian domestic acceptance of the war in Ukraine amid mounting casualties and economic costs by framing the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine as a defensive war with the West.

Russia shortly has its annual May Day parade and Putin will be desperate to announce to the Russian people that he and the military forces have achieved their stated objectives. Mariupol plays a large role in this as it is centered in the Donbas region that was clearly included in initial Russian invasion rhetoric.

## Nuclear

**Vladimir Putin** may resort to using a tactical or low-yield nuclear weapon in light of military setbacks in the invasion of Ukraine, the CIA director, William Burns, has said. During a speech in Atlanta, Burns said: "Given the potential desperation of President Putin and the Russian leadership ... none of us can take lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low-yield nuclear weapons." The Kremlin placed Russian nuclear forces on high alert shortly after the invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February. (Guardian).

**US Spy Chief Warns of Russia's Nuclear Threats, 'Potential Desperation'** - Russia's nuclear saber-rattling has the attention of top U.S. intelligence officials, some of whom are expressing growing concern about the Kremlin's willingness to unleash some of its nuclear arsenal as it faces "potential desperation" in Ukraine.

Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns warned Thursday that the world should not underestimate Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose appetite for risk has only grown "as his grip on Russia has tightened."

"Given the potential desperation of President Putin and the Russian leadership given the setbacks that they've faced so far militarily, none of us can take lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low-yield nuclear weapons," Burns said during a speech to students at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

"We're obviously very concerned," he said, noting that Putin has an "almost mystical belief that his destiny is to restore Russia's sphere of influence," which includes bringing Ukraine under Kremlin sway.

With Russia's recruitment drive faltering, its inability to bolster battalions transferred from Northern Ukraine to the east, and its seeming inability to provide a sound supply chain to replenish and resupply its forces in battle, it appears its eastern front will suffer similar hardships as were experienced in the first month of the war.

Should this be the case, and with the loss of its premier naval flagship, desperate times may call for desperate measures in order to reassure both the Russian people and the Russian General Staff that all is going according to plan.

That may lead to decisions on the use of unconventional and tactical nuclear weaponry, as mentioned above.

## Sanctions

**EU cutting off all Russian oil** - EU and US diplomats told the New York Times yesterday that the EU is planning a phased ban on Russian oil imports, likely before the end of the year. The EU is unlikely to ban Russian gas imports, on which many Europeans rely for heating and electricity, in the immediate future. It began a phased ban on Russian coal imports on April 7.

It is being reported that an announcement about a complete cessation of EU importing of Russian oil is imminent, painful as this may be.

**Sanctions effect** - Ukrainian military intelligence reported on April 15 that sanctions are increasingly disrupting Russia's ability to replace equipment losses. The GUR stated that Uralvagonzavod, the largest tank manufacturer in the world and producer of Russia's T-72 main battle tank, is facing rising interest rates on loans, rising prices on materials and components (including armored steel), and shortages of imported components. The GUR said that Russian import substitution efforts are failing to maintain existing contracts.

**World's biggest oil traders are set to cut out Russian oil purchases from the middle of May, report says** - The world's largest oil trading houses are set to reduce the amount of oil purchased from Russia from May 15th according to a report from Reuters on Thursday, quoting anonymous sources.

The sources claim that the major oil trading houses are going to cut their purchases in order to avoid breaking the EU's sanctions against Russia, although the bloc has not yet officially banned oil imports from the country, the report said.

**Russia Expels 18 Members Of EU Mission In Moscow In Retaliatory Move** - Moscow has expelled 18 employees of the European Union's delegation to Russia in retaliation for the expulsion of 19 Russians from Brussels earlier this month, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

**North Macedonia Expels Six Russian Diplomats** - North Macedonia has declared six Russian diplomats personae non gratae for violating diplomatic norms and ordered them to leave the country, the Foreign Ministry said today.

**Putin Accuses Western Banks Of Failing To Pay For Russian Gas In Rubles** - Putin has accused Western banks of failing to pay for Russian gas supplies after he demanded that EU member states and other countries pay for Russian gas in rubles.

Speaking at a meeting on the current situation in the country's oil and gas sector yesterday, he blamed Western partners for what he called "defaults on export deliveries of Russian energy resources." "Banks from these extremely unfriendly states are withholding the transfer of payments," Putin said.

## Peace Talks

**Kyiv is unlikely to accept a peace deal** without Russian forces withdrawing to at a minimum their pre-February 24 positions and likely hopes to further degrade the Russian military in eastern Ukraine and possibly retake Russian-occupied territory before reengaging with the Kremlin. Ukrainian presidential advisor Mykhailo Podolyak stated on April 9 that Ukraine is prepared to pay a high price for victory and that Ukrainian military victories in the east will provide substantial leverage to negotiate "powerful" security guarantees with the Kremlin. Podolyak and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky separately emphasized on April 11 that Ukraine is not prepared "to give up territory for peace." Ukrainian anger over Russian atrocities against Ukrainian civilians will additionally likely entrench Ukraine's unwillingness to negotiate with the Kremlin.

The Kremlin will likely stall negotiations until Russian forces redeploy from other axes to eastern Ukraine, hoping to translate any Russian military gains into leverage over Ukrainian negotiators. Putin said on April 12 that negotiations have reached an impasse. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said on April 8 that Russia could complete its invasion of Ukraine in the "foreseeable future." Russian forces will likely continue ongoing offensive operations in the Donbas region, feeding reinforcements into the fight as they become available rather than gathering reinforcements and replacements for a more coordinated and coherent offensive. The Kremlin likely hopes to capture at minimum the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts before resuming negotiations.

**Russia will seek peace or leave international arena forever** - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has warned Russia will either seek peace or be forced to "leave the international arena forever" following its invasion of Ukraine. In his nightly address on Wednesday, the president hailed "fruitful" negotiations with the leaders of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, who visited Kyiv.

## Humanitarian

**Ukraine's foreign ministry** has appealed to the UN to facilitate the return of Ukrainian children who have been "illegally deported" to Russia. In a statement, the ministry said Russia had "engaged in state-organised kidnapping of children and destruction of the future of the Ukrainian nation."

**30,000 Ukrainians returning home every day, say relief agencies** - More than 870,000 people who fled abroad since the Russian invasion on 24 February, have now returned to Ukraine, UN humanitarians said in their latest emergency update, amid concerns about deteriorating food security inside the country.

**Intercepted Russian calls** - The identities of a Russian soldier and his wife who discussed the rape of Ukrainian women in a phone call have been revealed following an investigation by RFE/RL's Russian Service and Schemes.

The investigation found that Roman Bykovsky, 27, and his wife Olga Bykovskaya, whose maiden name is Pinyasovaya, were the couple behind the shocking call that has fed fears of mass rape of Ukrainian women by Russian soldiers.

During the call, which Ukrainian security services in the Kherson region in the country's south said they intercepted before publishing it earlier this month, a woman can be heard giving permission to a man to rape Ukrainian women.

"Yes, I allow it. Just wear protection," the woman says between laughs.

Social media posts by Bykovsky's mother, Irina Bykovskaya, show that he is a member of Russia's armed forces.

When contacted by RFE/RL, Bykovsky confirmed his identity and said he was in Sevastopol, the Crimean port where Russia's Black Sea fleet is based. However, he denied he was the man on the call.

Olga Bykovskaya confirmed her husband was in Sevastopol, saying he was wounded and being treated in a hospital when RFE/RL contacted her.

Neither would answer any more questions.

On the same day as the HRW report, U.K. Ambassador to Ukraine Melinda Simmons called rape an element of Russia's unprovoked war campaign.

"Though we don't yet know the full extent of its use in Ukraine, it's already clear it was part of Russia's arsenal," Simmons wrote. "Women raped in front of their kids, girls in front of their families, as a deliberate act of subjugation."

If true that Russia is using this as an act of subjugation, it speaks to the Russian intent to present Ukraine as a nonentity and its people as "Untermensch," as was perpetrated by the Nazi's against the Jewish people before and during WWII.

It also speaks to mens rea, state of mind and intent – all elements of any criminal and war trials to follow.

## Impacts

**Simon Coveney sees destruction caused by Russian invasion of Ukraine and warns of 'war crimes'** - Ireland's Foreign Minister Simon Coveney yesterday met with senior Ukrainian officials yesterday, including Ukraine's foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba and defense minister Oleksii Reznikov.

"We believe that the most powerful countries in the world are accountable to international law and the atrocities against Ukraine citizens need to be part of a process to ensure full accountability."

Mr Coveney also visited the ravaged town of Bucha, where suspected killings of civilians were uncovered. He was given a tour of the city with Ukrainian special forces and the Garda Emergency Response Unit, and laid flowers at a memorial wall in Kyiv.

Mr Coveney said there has been "mass murder" of civilians in Ukrainian towns. He said Bucha has been "completely devastated" and its "population ravaged" in recent weeks.

**France** is planning to return its embassy to the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. It had moved to the western city of Lviv in March as Russia invaded. Volodymyr Zelenskyy has urged allies to resume their normal diplomatic presence in Ukraine.

**Nine humanitarian corridors** have been agreed for Friday, the Ukrainian deputy prime minister Iryna Vereshchuk has announced. A total of 2,557 people were evacuated from Ukrainian cities through humanitarian corridors on Thursday, Vereshchuk confirmed, with 289 of those from Mariupol. The head of the UN World Food Programme, meanwhile, said people were being “starved to death” in the besieged city.

## Widening of war front

**China is sending its most advanced fighter jet to patrol disputed seas** - China has begun sending its most advanced fighter aircraft, the J-20, to patrol the East and South China Seas, Chinese state media has reported.

Early versions of the J-20 stealth jet used Russian engines -- but those have since been replaced with domestically-produced twin engines. The jets were first shown to the public with the new Chinese engines last year at Airshow China.

The deployment is intended to "better safeguard China's airspace security and maritime interests," state-run tabloid Global Times reported on Wednesday, citing military experts.

Ren Yukun, a spokesperson for the J-20's state-run manufacturer, added that it was a "training routine" for the J-20 to begin conducting patrols now that it's equipped with Chinese engines, according to Global Times.

The announcement comes just weeks after United States Gen. Kenneth Wilsbach, the commander of US Pacific Air Forces, said US F-35s and Chinese J-20s came into close proximity with each other over the East China Sea.

## NATO

**Russia's deputy foreign minister, Alexander Grushko**, said Moscow would take “security and defense measures that we will deem necessary” if Sweden and Finland join NATO. In an interview with the Russian state-owned news agency TASS, the minister said the membership in the military alliance would “seriously worsen the military situation” and lead to “the most undesirable consequences.” Finland and Sweden had earlier taken a major step towards joining NATO.