

Conflict Update # 55

May 10th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Key Takeaways – Operational

The **Ukrainian counteroffensive** in northern Kharkiv took further ground and have possibly closed to within 10km of the Russian border.

Belarusian authorities are escalating rhetoric accusing NATO and the US of threatening Belarusian borders, but Belarus remains unlikely to join the war.

Russian operations around Izyum remain stalled.

DNR and Russian forces are advancing efforts to consolidate their control of the ruins of Mariupol, including reportedly attempting to reopen steel plants to produce military equipment.

Russian forces in eastern Ukraine continued attempts to encircle the Severodonetsk area and reportedly reached the Donetsk-Luhansk administrative border from Popasna.

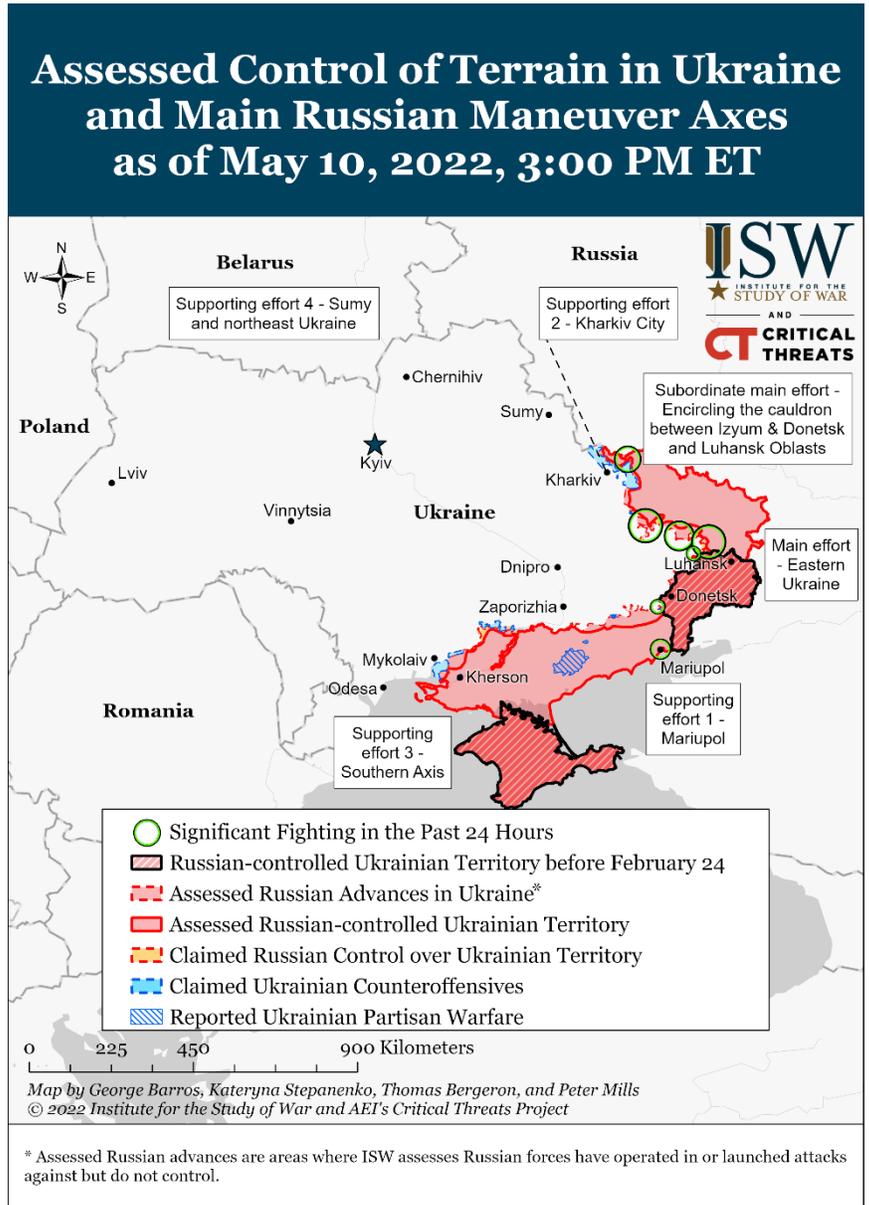
Russian and Ukrainian forces did not conduct any significant attacks on the southern axis.

Subordinate Main Effort—Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts

Russian forces did not make any confirmed advances in any direction from Izyum today. Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian

forces around Izyum are focusing on regrouping, replenishing equipment, and conducting reconnaissance to create conditions for renewed offensives east towards Lyman and Slovyansk.

Russian forces continued ground attacks and shelling along the line of contact in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and made marginal westward advances. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces moved west from Popasna and reached the administrative border of Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts, though ISW cannot independently confirm this claim. Ukrainian sources reported intense fighting to the north, west, and south of Severodonetsk in



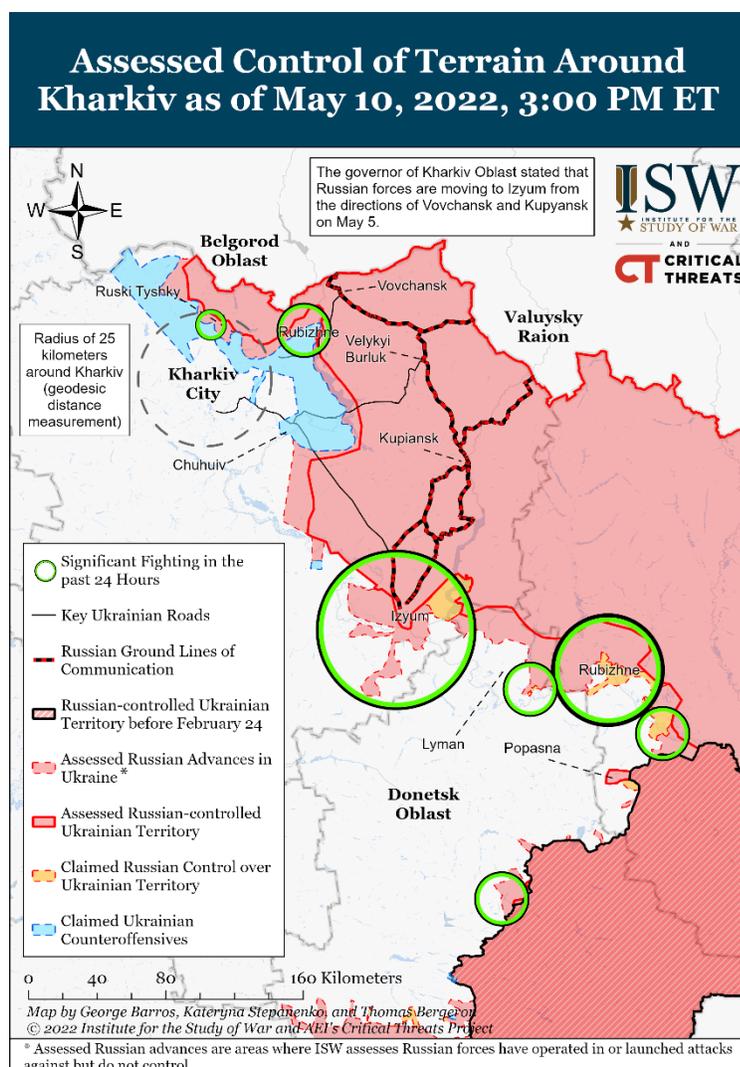
Vojevodivka, Toshkivke, Rubizhne, Lysychansk, Orikhove, Hirske, and Bilohorivka as Russian forces attempt to encircle the town.[10] Ukrainian forces notably destroyed a Russian pontoon bridge across the Siverskyi Donets River in the vicinity of Bilohorivka, which may allow Ukrainian forces to develop a line west of Severodonetsk and disrupt the intended Russian encirclement of the Rubizhne-Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area.

Russian troops continued attacks in Donetsk Oblast around Oleksandrivka and Shandryholove in order to move west to the Donetsk-Kharkiv administrative border. Russian forces additionally continued unsuccessful frontal assaults around Donetsk City but did not make any confirmed advances on May 10. Pro-Russian reporter Aleksandr Sladkov, who is operating around Donetsk City, complained that Russian forces are fighting Ukrainians at a 1:1 assault force ratio and have not been able to push Ukrainian forces from their positions in Donetsk.

Supporting Effort #1—Mariupol - Russian forces continued to conduct air and artillery strikes and ground assaults against Ukrainian positions in the Azovstal Steel Plant on May 10. Deputy Ukrainian Prime Minister Iryna Vershchuk reported that there are 1,000 Ukrainian soldiers in the plant and that hundreds are wounded. A senior US defense official noted that Russian forces are increasingly relying on “dumb bombs” to assault Mariupol because they have expended precision-guided munition supplies. Russian authorities are continuing to prepare Mariupol for economic integration. Advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol Petro Andryushchenko claimed that occupation authorities of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) are trying to call workers back to the captured Ilyich Iron and Steel Work Plant to launch production of military equipment to supply Russian and proxy forces.

Supporting Effort #2—Kharkiv City - Ukrainian forces reportedly pushed Russian troops further north from Kharkiv City toward the international border. Ukrainian General Staff confirmed today that Ukrainian forces recaptured Cherkasy Tyshky and Ruski Tyshky, both within 10 kilometers of the northeast boundary of Kharkiv City, after unverified reports on May 7 and 9 that Russian forces withdrew from the two towns. Ukrainian units reportedly also took control of Pytomnyk, 10 kilometers directly north of Kharkiv City. The Ukrainian 227th Kharkiv Territorial Defense Battalion claimed that they successfully advanced north of Staryi Saltiv (about 40 kilometers east of Kharkiv City) and liberated Bairak, Zamulivka, Verkhni Saltiv, and Rubizhne (a different Rubizhne than the town of the same name in Kharkiv Oblast) on May 10. A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian troops are as far north as Vovchansk, which is less than 10 kilometers south of the Russian border. ISW cannot independently confirm this claim, but it is consistent with the overall Ukrainian push toward the Russian border over the last few days.

The Borivka Village Council reported that Russian forces are withdrawing en masse from Borova and Bohuslavka, southeast Kharkiv Oblast, and moving north in the direction of Kupyansk. Russian forces are likely prioritizing reinforcing their grouping northeast



of Kharkiv to prevent further Ukrainian counteroffensives in the direction of the international border at the expense of offensive operations to the southeast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that elements of the 138th Separate Mechanized Brigade of the 6th Combined Arms Army withdrew to Belgorod due to losses sustained in Kharkiv Oblast.

Supporting Effort #3—Southern Axis - Russian and Ukrainian troops clashed on the line of contact between Kherson and Mykolaiv Oblasts but neither side made any confirmed advances. Russian forces continued to shell Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv oblasts. Russian forces additionally intensified airstrikes against Odesa. Transnistrian authorities announced that they will extend the “red level” terrorist threat until May 25.

Supporting Effort #4—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine - There were no significant events on this axis in the past 24 hours.

Immediate items to watch

- The Belarusian Defense Ministry announced the second stage of rapid response force exercises, but Belarus remains unlikely to join the war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces will likely continue to merge offensive efforts southward of Izyum with westward advances from Donetsk in order to encircle Ukrainian troops in southern Kharkiv Oblast and western Donetsk.
- Russia is likely setting conditions to integrate occupied Ukrainian territories directly into Russia, as opposed to creating proxy “People’s Republics.” Russian forces have apparently decided to seize the Azovstal plant through ground assault and will likely continue operations accordingly.
- Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kharkiv City are pushing back Russian positions northeast of the city towards the international border and will likely continue to force the Russians to reinforce those positions at the cost of reinforcing Russian offensive operations elsewhere.
- Russian forces may be preparing to conduct renewed offensive operations to capture the entirety of Kherson Oblast in the coming days.

Ukraine destroys more Russian naval craft - Ukraine has destroyed 'Putin parade boat used by Russian leader to inspect naval fleets' with laser-guided bomb off Snake Island.

A white-coloured Raptor-class patrol vessel was reportedly obliterated by a laser-guided bomb dropped from a Ukraine-operated Bayraktar TB2 drone near Snake Island in the Black Sea.

The Russian leader has used such a boat with the designation 001 for fleet inspections in Sevastopol and St Petersburg.

He also uses the patrol boat to deliver speeches and conduct military parades.

Ukraine's navy shared drone footage of the alleged strike on their official Facebook channel, although it has not been independently verified.

The suspected sinking of the Russian leader's patrol boat comes as two other 55-ft-long Raptors were hit in recent days in similar attacks.

Ukraine's armed forces also destroyed a Serna class landing craft with a Tor surface-to-air missile system onboard suspected of targeting Snake Island, some 80 miles south of Odesa.



Downed Russian fighter jets are being found with basic GPS 'taped to the dashboards,' - Wrecked Russian fighter jets are being found with rudimentary GPS receivers "taped to the dashboards" in Ukraine because their inbuilt navigation systems are so bad, the UK's defense secretary, Ben Wallace, said.

Speaking at the National Army Museum in London Monday, Wallace commemorated those who died in World War II and called Russia's invasion of Ukraine "senseless and self-defeating."



He added that there was evidence suggesting Russian military hardware was being pushed to breaking point by the invasion of Ukraine.

"GPS' receivers have been found taped to the dashboards of downed Russian Su-34s so the pilots knew where they were, due to the poor quality of their own systems," he said.

"The result is that whilst Russia have large amounts of artillery and armor that they like parading, they are unable to leverage them for combined arms maneuver and just resort to mass indiscriminate barrages," he added.

The Su-34 was first manufactured in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s but is still one of Russia's leading fighter jets.

Last month, Ukrainian troops paraded what they said was a Russian drone that had been covered in duct tape and fitted with a generic plastic bottle top for a fuel cap. In March, Ukrainian troops found what appeared to be Russian army bandages dating to 1978 discarded on a battlefield.

Russian Troops Ill-Prepared for Ukraine War, Says Ex-Kremlin Mercenary - The Russian military's failure to seize the Ukrainian capital was inevitable because in the preceding years they had never directly faced a powerful enemy, according to a former mercenary with the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group who fought alongside the Russian army.

Marat Gabidullin took part in Wagner Group missions on the Kremlin's behalf in Syria and in a previous conflict in Ukraine, before deciding to go public about his experience inside the secretive private military company.

He quit the Wagner group in 2019, but several months before Russia launched the invasion on Feb. 24 Gabidullin, 55, said he received a call from a recruiter who invited him to go back to fighting as a mercenary in Ukraine.

He refused, in part because, he said, he knew Russian forces were not up to the job, even though they trumpeted their arsenal of new weapons and their successes in Syria where they helped President Bashar al-Assad defeat an armed rebellion.

"They were caught completely by surprise that the Ukrainian army resisted so fiercely and that they faced the actual army," Gabidullin said about Russia's setbacks in Ukraine.

He said people he spoke to on the Russian side had told him they expected to face rag-tag militias when they invaded Ukraine, not well-drilled regular troops.

"I told them: 'Guys, that's a mistake'," said Gabidullin, who is now in France where he is publishing a book about his experiences fighting with the Wagner Group.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said he did not know who Gabidullin was and whether he has ever been a member of private military companies.

Ukraine conflict taking ‘heavy toll’ on Russia’s elite units, says UK - In yet another indication of the extent of losses suffered by Russia during its ongoing invasion of Ukraine, and its failure to make significant inroads against its much smaller neighbour, the United Kingdom said on Friday that some of Russia’s ‘most capable units’ had suffered ‘heavy losses’, adding that it will take Moscow a ‘long time’ to reconstitute its armed forces.

“The conflict in Ukraine is taking a heavy toll on some of Russia’s most capable units, and most advanced capabilities. It will take considerable time and expense for Russia to reconstitute its armed forces following this conflict. It will be particularly challenging to replace modernised and advanced equipment due to sanctions, restricting Russia’s access to critical microelectronic components,” the UK’s ministry of defence said on Twitter, in its latest update on the situation in the east European nation.

‘It’s as Tall as a Person’: Russians Reveal Their Secret Dump of Dead Soldiers in Donetsk - Russian authorities in Ukraine’s occupied city of Donetsk are tossing the bodies of their dead soldiers in a secret dump “by the thousands” and charging their loved ones money to find them.

That’s according to a new audio recording released by Ukraine’s Security Service on Tuesday, which is purportedly an intercepted telephone conversation between two Russians discussing how one of their missing friends was finally found.

In the two-and-a-half minute recording, an unidentified man tells his female relative that the fate of “Inna’s brother” is finally known after he went missing a month ago.

“It’s better that you don’t hear this,” the man says at first, reluctant to spill all the grim details.

After more urging, he finally explains that the unidentified dead man’s “sister went to Donetsk, and there, basically, roughly speaking, is a dump.”

“They just toss them there. And then later it’s easier to make as if they disappeared without a trace. It’s easier for them to pretend they are just missing, and that’s it,” he said, noting that “there are thousands.”

“There’s nowhere left to place them. It’s a dump. I’m telling you in plain Russian—a dump. It’s as tall as a person,” he said, adding that the site is “fenced off, sealed, they don’t let anyone in.”

According to him, the only reason local authorities at the dump site let the woman find her brother was because she paid “good money.”

No further details were provided by Ukrainian intelligence on the exact location of the makeshift morgue, and it was not immediately clear if the man heard in the audio was a Russian soldier himself, though Ukrainian authorities described him as an “invader.”

The disturbing intercept comes after Al Jazeera on Monday released footage of refrigerated train cars holding the unclaimed bodies of Russian troops killed in Ukraine. Inside, there appeared to be human-size bodies stacked on top of each other in white bags. Ukrainian authorities said Moscow has refused to take the bodies back home, apparently to keep the lid on the sky-high death toll.

Note – Photos of Russian soldier bodies have not been included in this Update

Putin

Former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov says Vladimir Putin is "losing strength," after he failed to mention any triumphs in his Victory Day speech.

Another Russian Tycoon Dies Under Strange Circumstances - A former top manager of LUKoil, Aleksandr Subbotin, has reportedly died under strange circumstances, the latest in a series of mysterious deaths of Russian businessmen since Moscow launched its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

Citing sources close to the Moscow regional police on May 9, media reported that forensic tests were held to find possible drugs in Subbotin's body, which was found in a basement in a house in the town of Mytishchi near the Russian capital on May 8.

That brings to 10 the number of oligarchs who have died since the invasion commenced.

Top Russian Website Briefly Posts Materials Critical Of Kremlin Amid Crackdown, War - One of Russia's leading news websites, Lenta.ru, briefly posted materials critical of President Vladimir Putin and his government amid a crackdown by the state on independent journalism and media reports slamming Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

About a dozen reports appeared on Lenta.ru on May 9 at the same time Putin was using the commemoration of the 77th anniversary of the Soviet Union's role in the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 to justify Russia's war against Ukraine.

The reports carried headlines such as "Putin Unleashed One of the Bloodiest Wars Of the 21st Century," "Putin Has Turned Into a Miserable Dictator and Paranoiac," "Russia's Elite Sick Of Nepotism and Being Sycophants," and "It's Easy To Cover Holes In The Economy With War. Putin Must Go Away."

Each of the articles carried a disclaimer saying, "this material was not authorized by our leadership, and the presidential administration will kick the editors in the pants for its publication."

Mediazona and The Insider websites quoted Lenta.ru correspondent Yegor Polyakov as saying that he and his colleague, Aleksandra Miroshnikova, posted the materials in q

Sanctions

How Lithuania is freeing itself from Russian energy - A new pipeline is connecting the Baltic states with Poland, ergo with the entire European gas network. For Poland, it's been a lifesaver. For Lithuania, it's just one part of a much larger scheme.

The "Gas Interconnection Poland-Lithuania" (GIPL) is part of a larger plan to further integrate Lithuania and two other Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia, into the European Union's energy markets.

The Baltics used to be considered an "energy island" within the EU, said Romas Svedas, a former EU diplomat and Lithuania's deputy energy minister, now an independent consultant with a teaching position at Vilnius University. "The significance is connecting the three Baltic states into the energy system and pipeline network of continental Europe," he told DW.

Humanitarian

German, Dutch Foreign Ministers Call For Justice During Surprise Visit To Ukraine – The foreign ministers of Germany and the Netherlands have made a surprise visit to Ukraine, stopping in the Kyiv suburbs of Bucha and Irpin, where Russian forces are accused of committing war crimes before retreating last month.

Baerbock said the victims were owed justice. Hoekstra walked the streets of Irpin, another nearby Kyiv suburb, and echoed Baerbock's calls for possible war crimes to be fully investigated.

"The bombed-out houses and buildings illustrate the impact the war has had on the lives of the men, women and children who live here," he said on Twitter.

"These acts cannot go unpunished. The Netherlands is committed to establish the truth and achieve justice," he added.

The visit is also a sign of a reset in relations between Kyiv and Berlin over Germany's early response to the war and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's detente policy toward Moscow when he was foreign minister from 2005 to 2009 and again from 2013 to 2017.

He has since admitted the policy stance was a mistake.

NATO

All You Need To Know As Finland And Sweden Inch Closer To NATO - On May 11, the Finnish parliament's foreign affairs committee is expected to start drafting a short report for the plenary on the numerous hearings it has held since Helsinki completed a security white paper in April. That white paper contained no concrete recommendation on joining NATO but described the changing security environment in Europe since February.

Two days later, on May 13, Stockholm is expected to publish a Swedish security report in its effort to catch up with its Nordic neighbor to the east.

However, the more crucial -- but so far tentative -- dates to look out for are May 14-15.

On May 14, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Social Democratic Party, the largest group in parliament, is expected to establish its position on NATO membership. Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson's Social Democrats should do the same a day later. Both leaders are believed to prefer membership for their respective countries, but both of their parties have, at least historically, been lukewarm on joining NATO.

Then there's May 17-18, when Finland's largely ceremonial but highly influential President Sauli Niinisto travels to Sweden on an official visit. He is also believed to favor NATO membership and has noted that "Finland's course will be clear by the time of the visit." So don't rule out some sort of official joint proclamation in Stockholm during the visit.

Then there is the NATO summit in Madrid on June 28-30. NATO officials have indicated that the accession protocols for Finland and Sweden could be signed at that time if the formal applications landed on NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's desk by the end of May.

Finland is on the verge of asking to join NATO. Here's why that's bad news for Putin -

Containment

Latest weapons package for Ukraine includes jamming equipment - For the first time since Russia invaded Ukraine, the United States will provide jamming equipment to the Ukrainian military — a signal that electronic warfare activity could be ramping up in the eastern Donbas region of the country.

On Friday evening, the Defense Department announced an additional \$150 million tranche of weapons for Ukraine, which includes "electronic jamming equipment" from existing US stocks.

A senior defense official, who spoke to journalists Monday on the condition of anonymity, said the lack of specific information regarding the EW equipment was intentional, and declined to provide additional information about what jamming equipment will be sent to Ukraine.

Impacts

'Romania has an important role in cargo flow with Ukraine and Moldova' - Romanian Transport Minister Grindeanu has stated that the country now has an extremely important role for the cargo flow to and from Ukraine and/or the Republic of Moldova, and implicitly for the economy of the two countries. According to Grindeanu, since the start of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Romanian infrastructure, port, rail, road or air, offers vital transport ways for the transit of goods and necessary raw materials.

According to the Minister of Transport, increasing operating capacity of the Port of Constanta represents a major support for the flows of cargo coming from Ukraine, through the Republic of Moldova, on the Siret-Constanta corridor, while the ships under Ukrainian flag are benefiting from quick access to Romanian ports and are exempt from paying port service tariffs.

Lithuania Adopts Resolution Calling Russia 'Terrorist State,' Accuses Moscow Of 'Genocide' - Lithuanian lawmakers have unanimously adopted a resolution declaring Russia "a terrorist state" and calling Moscow's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine "genocide against the Ukrainian people."

In their May 10 resolution, the lawmakers also called for the creation of an international court to prosecute Russian officials responsible for the war in Ukraine, similar to the Nuremberg trials held by the Allies against representatives of the defeated Nazi Germany for plotting and carrying out invasions of other countries and other crimes in World War II.

"The Russian Federation, whose armed forces deliberately and systemically chose civilian targets to bombard, is the state that supports and carries out acts of terrorism," the Lithuanian parliamentary resolution says.

The resolution compares Russian President Vladimir Putin with Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, calling modern Russia under Putin's rule "a reincarnation" of the Soviet Union.

'Perfect storm' facing farmers to be felt at supermarket checkout - Australian grain farmers are weathering a "perfect storm" of record-high fertilizer costs that are expected to result in lower yields and increased food prices over the coming months.

High fertiliser prices – in addition to high diesel and labour costs – are squeezing farm budgets, GrainGrowers, a national group representing arable farmers, has warned.

"The high cost of fertiliser is having a really big impact," GrainGrowers Chairman Brett Hosking said.

He said Australian farmers will be closely watching the fertiliser prices during the winter cropping season.

Data from Thomas Elders Markets showed the cost of sending fertiliser to Australia in April 2022 was \$1251 per tonne compared with \$533 per tonne in May 2021.

The conflict in Ukraine has driven the price even higher. Ukraine has deposits of vital fertiliser ingredients urea and potash, and exports have been limited since Russia invaded the country on February 24.

Russia is also the world's largest fertiliser exporter, but trade sanctions have imposed limits on imports into Australia.

Added to the problem is the high price of natural gas used in the production of fertiliser.

Australia imports most of its fertiliser from the Middle East, a major producer of gas. But Thomas Elders Markets analyst Andrew Whitelaw said the gas price has "gone through the roof" since the invasion of Ukraine.

Russia Seeks to Keep Water Transit Between Caspian and Azov Seas Open Year Round - At present, Moscow can move ships, including the naval vessels of the Caspian Flotilla, between the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Azov for

only about eight months out of the year because of low water levels in the Volga–Don Canal. However, because of the Kremlin’s desire to reintegrate and dominate the former Soviet republics to the south of Russia, including Ukraine, and be able to use the ships of its Caspian Flotilla not only against Ukraine but in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, Moscow has now announced plans for a major effort to widen and deepen the canal. Those improvements would permit ships to transit the Volga–Don Canal 365 days out of the year. Officials say that the \$10 billion project will be completed in 2030. And some of them suggest that Chinese firms will play a major role in this effort, given that Russian companies currently cannot obtain Western support and lack the domestic capacity to complete such a giant undertaking.

Two important if largely neglected moves were made in this direction since President Vladimir Putin launched Russia’s large-scale re-invasion of Ukraine on February 24. On the one hand, Russian officials announced several weeks ago that they would go ahead with plans announced earlier to widen and deepen the Volga–Don Canal to allow year-round use of the waterway. This represents a delay from earlier plans to complete the work by 2028. Yet the fact that Moscow is pressing ahead, even amidst the war and tightening Western sanctions, highlights how important riverine traffic is for Russia economically, geopolitically and militarily. Moreover, the initiative appears to mark the end of any possibility that Russia will build a new and even more expensive new canal across the North Caucasus—as many there had long been pushing for.

On the other hand, representatives of China’s CCCC Dredging Group came to Russia in the lead-up to that decision to discuss with the Astrakhan managers of the Volga–Don Canal the possibility for Chinese firms to take part in dredging operations to widen and deepen that waterway (Rosmorport.ru, March 11). Russian officials were reportedly receptive.

And now that a decision has been made to address the canal’s limitations—a decision likely driven by security considerations as much as economic ones—it appears that China will become a major player in this effort. Such cooperation will enable Russia to use the canal not only to promote a role for itself in China’s east-west trade but also for military and security purposes. In the latter case, even though the project will not be completed for a minimum of eight years, any improvement in the canal will ultimately aid Russia in prosecuting its severe pressure campaign against Ukraine.

Now that China has become involved, removing the barriers posed by a lack of Western investment, the reconstruction of the Volga–Don Canal is likely to proceed, although quite likely at a slower pace than Moscow has announced. Still, if this effort succeeds, even in part, the internal waterway will be able to carry container traffic far more inexpensively than railways in the region do. This would undercut Western and Chinese-backed rail projects in the region (see EDM, April 19, 20, 2022) and serve as a reminder that even in this century, riverine traffic plays a significant geo-economic and geopolitical role (see Jamestown.org, September 25, 2020). Moreover, it will not only boost economic traffic in the south but allow Russia to achieve two goals. First, it will open up a path for the Caspian Flotilla to leave that sea and supplement Russia’s hard-pressed navy in the Sea of Azov and Black Sea. And second, it will enable the integration of river and canal traffic in southern Russia into Moscow’s broader, oft dismissed, plans for using its rivers and canals to the north and west to project Russian influence (see EDM, February 18, 2020, and May 13, 2020). (Eurasia Daily Monitor).

Widening of conflict and war

Belarusian President Speaks to the West - While the Belarusian opposition insists that President Lukashenka is unworthy of attention because he no longer has anything to offer to the collective West (YouTube, May 2), opposition leader and 2020 presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is seen navigating the corridors of power in Europe and the United States (Euroradio, May 4). And yet, Western journalists continue to request Lukashenka for interviews, which, indeed, he has lately been sitting down for “much more frequently than prior to 2020” (Svaboda.org, May 5).

Notably, on May 5, Lukashenka gave a 1.5-hour interview to Ian Phillips, the vice president of the Associated Press (AP) news agency (YouTube, President.gov.by, May 5).

Three issues touched upon by Belarus's president in his conversation with the AP arguably rise above the rest.

- The **first** was yet further reassurance that the Belarusian military is not going to enter the war in Ukraine. Phillips posed the question on this subject by linking it to Belarus's announcement of combat readiness exercises on the eve of the interview. Lukashenka justified these drills by pointing to the vastly increased military presence of US, British and other Western armed contingents (up from 3,000 service members one year ago to 32,000 now) next to Belarus's borders and by the alleged necessity to safeguard his country's southern border from "nasty surprises." At least to some extent, the oft-repeated pledge to not enter the Russo-Ukrainian war contradicts Lukashenka's acknowledgement that Belarus and Russia "have effectively a common army;" and it is contradicted by his acknowledgement that upon concluding the joint Allied Resolve exercises with Russia back in February, some Russian units indeed entered Ukraine from Belarusian territory.
- The **second** issue of importance raised in the interview was Lukashenka's professed certainty that Russia is "doomed" (obrechena) to emerge victorious from the ongoing war regardless of massive Western arms aid to Ukraine. Belarus's leader mentioned that twice and insisted that the war can be stopped within a week provided Washington tells Ukrainian President Zelenskyy to rejoin negotiations with Russia. In Lukashenka's view, the lack of such an order from the US side subjects Ukraine to needless death and destruction. Washington, according to the Belarusian leader, is interested in the continuation of this conflict in order to weaken Russia before focusing on a showdown with China (YouTube, President.gov.by, May 5).
- The **third** issue of import was Lukashenka's opinion that contrary to his initial expectations, Russia's war is, indeed, dragging on (YouTube, President.gov.by, May 5). Western media outlets focused most strongly on these utterances in their accounts of the AP interview. The next day, the Kremlin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, replied that the military operation was unfolding as planned (RIA Novosti, May 6).

Lukashenka described his relationship with Putin as "the best possible between the leaders of two states." He attributed tensions that at times flared between him and Putin to character traits (whereas he is more open and flamboyant, Putin is more private) and to the still lacking level playing field between Russia and Belarus as far as economic prices are concerned.