

Conflict Update # 326

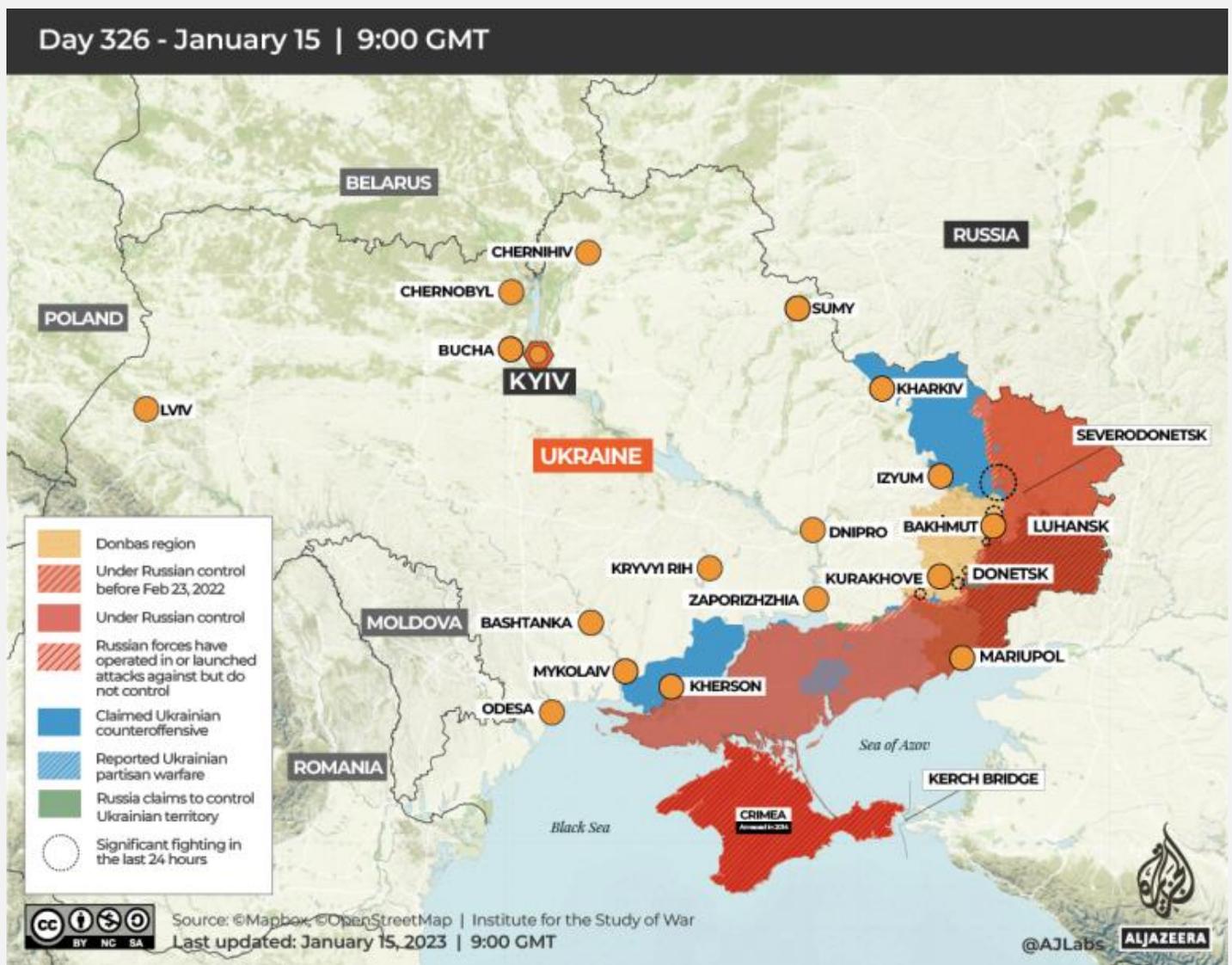
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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 115,290 (630) soldiers killed, 3,106 (+2) enemy tanks, 6,183 (+10) armored combat vehicles, 2,094 (+4) artillery systems, 437 (+0) MLRS systems, 219 (+0) air defense systems, 286 (+0) warplanes, 276 (+0) helicopters, 1,872 (+5) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 749 (+26) cruise missiles, 17 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,846 (+0) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 187 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Civilian death toll from attack in Dnipro rises- The regional governor's adviser, Natalia Babachenko, has said 30 people were confirmed dead so far after an apartment building complex in the city of Dnipro was hit during a major Russian missile attack.

More than 30 were in hospital, including 12 in a serious condition, Babachenko said.

Between 30 to 40 people could still be trapped under debris, she said.

Update - Ukraine has said there is little hope of pulling any more survivors from the rubble of an apartment block in the city of Dnipro on Sunday, a day after the building was hit during a major Russian missile attack.

President Zelenskyy said a child was among those confirmed dead so far and 73 people had been wounded, including 13 children. 39 people had been rescued but a further 43 were missing, he said on the Telegram messaging app.

Emergency workers said they had heard people screaming for help from underneath piles of debris from the nine-story apartment block in the south-central city, and were using moments of silence to help direct their efforts. Freezing temperatures added to rescuers' concerns.



"The chances of saving people now are minimal," Dnipro's Mayor Borys Filatov told Reuters. I think the number of dead will be in the dozens."

Comment - These are civilian deaths and injuries. Russia cannot stand in battle against the Ukrainian military for fear of being killed, so they instead target innocent civilians, women, children and aged. And they target them from afar, hundreds of kilometers away and in Russia and the Caspian Sea. Cowards to their cores.

Germany: Russians responsible for war crimes in Ukraine 'must be held accountable' - The German ministry of defence has said Russia's leaders and forces responsible for war crimes in Ukraine "must be held accountable." Germany's Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock will be travelling to the Hague, it added.

Those responsible for the crimes committed must be held accountable - from Russian soldiers raping, pillaging & firing missiles on homes in Dnipro to the leadership ordering these crimes. That is one of the reasons why @ABaerbock is traveling to The Hague tomorrow."

Moscow says it is not responsible for Dnipro attack: AJ correspondent - The spokesperson for the Russian foreign ministry has said Moscow is not responsible for the attack on an apartment block in Dnipro, Ukraine that was destroyed yesterday, reported Al Jazeera's Ali Hashem from the Russian capital.

"Rather, it is a Ukrainian anti-missile system that missed and hit the building and caused this massacre," Hashem reported the spokesperson as saying. "In general, in Moscow, the reaction to the war continues by creating a picture of a different situation, and [maintaining] the attacks that were launched on Ukrainian targets yesterday were aimed at

infrastructure targets and that there was no real aim at civilians," Hashem said. **Comment** – And my late uncle has a great investment trust you may want to buy in to.

'There are no military facilities here': Dnipro attack survivor - In Dnipro, workers used a crane as they tried to rescue people trapped on the upper floors of an apartment tower where about 1,700 were living. Some residents signalled for help with lights on their mobile phones.

Ivan Garnuk was in his apartment when the building was hit and said he felt lucky to have survived. He described his shock that the Russians would strike a residential building with no strategic value.

"There are no military facilities here. There is nothing here," he told The Associated Press. "There is no air defence, there are no military bases here. It just hit civilians, innocent people."

Belarus says air force drills with Russia purely defensive - Belarus's Security Council has said that joint air force drills with Russia, due to start next week, were purely defensive in nature and would focus on reconnaissance missions and how to thwart a potential attack, the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

Minsk also said it was "ready" for any "provocative actions" by Ukraine, as a flurry of military activity in the country has triggered fresh fears in Kyiv and the West that Russia could be preparing to use its ally – which acted as a springboard for Russia's invasion last February – to mount a new ground offensive on Ukraine.

Comment –I offer you too the investment trust offer from my late uncle!

Three killed, 13 injured in Russia's Belgorod region - Three people have been killed and 13 injured in an ammunition explosion in Russia's Belgorod region, Reuters reported on Sunday, citing the RIA Novosti news agency.

Authorities said earlier today 10 Russian servicemen were injured in the blast in a cultural centre in the Belgorod region, which borders Ukraine and is the location of several Russian military bases and training grounds.

The 112 and Baza Telegram channels, associated with Russia's law enforcement agencies, said dead and injured were Russian conscripts who were called up to fight in Ukraine under Russia's mobilisation drive, announced last September.

Comment - ??? – Another explosion?

Ten Russian soldiers injured in another blast in Belgorod: TASS cites emergency services - Ten Russian soldiers have been injured in a blast in the Belgorod region, the TASS news agency has reported, citing emergency services.

TASS said there was a fire overnight in a local cultural centre where ammunition was also being stored, which caused the explosions. Russia's Belgorod region borders Ukraine and is home to a number of Russian military bases and training grounds.

Comment – Another blast? This is becoming all too frequent – and embarrassing.

'We can handle everything': Ukrainian medics stoic near frontline – Bloodied helmets and body armour cut from dead soldiers are discarded on a roadside leading to Soledar, but the Ukrainian medics waiting there stay focused on those they can save.

Surgeon Vadim, 31, joined the military after Russia invaded Ukraine in February, putting his skills to work "to help the living". On Saturday, he was posted near Soledar, the old mining town in the eastern region of Donetsk and the epicentre of fighting that has been called the bloodiest of the war. "It is very difficult here. But it was no less difficult in other places," he told AFP. "Here is where the intensity is greatest. It's definitely hard. But we can handle everything."

On the road slick with ice and whipped by the wind, servicemen pace in the snow or make preparations in ambulances for when the wounded are brought in from the nearby frontline.

When an ambulance arrives, they wounded men quickly into them to hospital.

Two of the wounded, manage to move under their stretcher, screams in pain as

A medic pulls off his latex pile of others mixed with on the roadside.

Another kneels in the snow over vest, gathering cartridges and identification documents.



leap into action, helping another vehicle that will take

though dazed and bandaged, own steam. A third, on a he is loaded in.

gloves and tosses them into a empty emergency medical kits

one of the wounded's armored searching for the man's

Putin's major dilemma exposed after Soledar gains: Igor Girkin - Moscow's claim its forces have captured Soledar means Putin will have to make a tough decision on how to balance competing interests among those fighting in his invasion in Ukraine, according to former Russian commander Igor Girkin.

Russia's military said Friday it had captured the Donetsk town, allowing it to push on towards the city of Bakhmut nine miles south, and the scene of fierce fighting for months. Kyiv has rejected this and said the fight for Soledar is ongoing.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has taken a strong personal stake in the operation in which his troops were heavily involved, although the Russian Ministry of Defense did not initially acknowledge the role of the private military company (PMC) in the battle.

The Russian MoD later recognized the participation of Wagner troops as a fight develops over who should take credit for the purported advance.

Girkin said on Telegram that there was an "acute conflict" between unofficial forces such as Wagner and the traditional Russian military command, a situation which during a war he believed was "completely unacceptable."

He said the chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov, now in charge of the Ukraine campaign, posed a risk for Wagner because he and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu want to subordinate, or even disband, Wagner and transfer its troops and equipment to the overall Russian military effort.

This would remove all of those whom Shoigu and Gerasimov personally consider "hostile" for themselves and dangerous politically, said Girkin, a military blogger who has been critical of Russia's war effort.

Prigozhin is an ally of Putin and is said to have the ear of the president but Girkin's comments have "exposed a major dilemma" for the Russian president, according to the Institute for the Study of War think tank (ISW).

Girkin said Putin "must act as arbiter" between what appear competing interests of Prigozhin and the MoD. The options are for Wagner to retain its role in the war, or for Prigozhin to be sidelined, which would end his political influence. The latter case would strengthen the position of Shoigu, although would not please Putin's inner circle, Girkin said.

In a swipe at Putin's distancing of himself from the military failures in Ukraine, Girkin said that "the most normal way out of the current situation would be for Putin to personally accept the role of commander-in-chief."

"However, the president has been stubbornly evading personal responsibility for the actions of the troops in the war for almost 11 months," Girkin wrote, adding Putin would have to choose between sidelining Prigozhin, deal "a strong blow to Shoigu—or take up the matter himself."

Putin scrambling to find troops - Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis said Friday that Putin (pictured below in a doctored photo grouping – the blonde female officer in the bottom left has been pictured on fishing vessels, on stage and elsewhere) is "scrambling" to find more troops to fight in Ukraine despite Moscow recently claiming that its forces captured Soledar.

During an interview with MSNBC hostess Andrea Mitchell, Stavridis weighed in on reports that Russia is resorting to prisoners, Wagner Group, reservists, and others to fight in Ukraine.



"Putin is really scrambling...to gain the manpower, he's going to the prisons, he's going to the homeless shelters, [and] he's taking people in their 50s and 60s," he said. "I'm in my early 60s, I don't think the U.S. Army is searching for me to send me into combat. But he'll take anything. It's a sign of how difficult this fight has become for him."

A string of Russian failures got scores of troops killed in a Ukrainian strike, and Moscow's reaction only made things worse - A New Year Ukrainian strike killed hundreds of Russian troops, highlighting a series of command failures that put soldiers in a vulnerable position in the first place. Moscow's response to the deadly incident has only made things worse and hasn't really addressed any of the problems that caused it.

Security experts told Insider that the incident highlighted Russia's "lack of skill at the tactical level," referring specifically to their inability to lead and safely house troops in a combat zone. Moscow's response though has been to excuse command failures by blaming troops use of cell phones to call families and fabricating revenge strikes.

Ukrainian forces used US-provided High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) to strike Russian positions during the New Year holiday in Makiivka, an occupied city in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region.

Russia said that nearly 90 soldiers were killed in the attack — a rare disclosure of battlefield losses. Ukraine's military, however, placed the death toll at a much higher figure of around 400 people, with some internal Russian estimates placing the figure around 600. These estimates could not be independently verified.

The attack sparked sweeping criticism and condemnation of Moscow's military leadership by prominent lawmakers, government officials, and military bloggers. They complained that the Kremlin placed troops near ammunition storage, allowed them to use cellphones that emit location data, and stationed them within firing range of Ukrainian weapons.

"Having that many military personnel that concentrated, together on a battlefield like that, in artillery range, is kind of operational and tactical malpractice" on the part of command, Ian Williams, a fellow in the international security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told Insider. **(Comment** – Russia has been cumulating troops in this fashion for hundreds of years, this is their battle preparation modus operandum. The only difference now is the Ukrainian ability to instantaneously operationalize incoming tactical information and convert this into deliberate strike coordination – all within minutes with aid from American satellite networks. Triangulation of partisan whispers, OP observations, satellite intelligence and other related maneuver data are all gathered and centered on a developing target to devastating effect). Russian troop use of cell phones – given they are generally calling home for help in obtaining kit and clothing – attracts Ukrainian attention like military flies to a honeypot.

Moscow was quick to blame the deadly HIMARS attack on its own troops, attributing the losses to their use of cellphones, saying that this allowed Ukraine to determine their position and conduct the strike. This story, however,

was dismissed by some in Russia — such as a war reporter who was previously honored by Putin — and also in Ukraine by senior military officials.

It's unclear if cellphones played a role in the strike. If they did, it is unclear if Russian troops were explicitly told not to use their phones and did anyways, or if these rules were actually enforced. "In any case, it's a lack of oversight, it's a lack of discipline, or a lack of awareness," Williams said.

Battlefield cellphone usage by Russian troops has been a constant issue plaguing Putin's military throughout his invasion, which has used their data at times to pinpoint their locations.

Still, Moscow's rush to slap the blame on its own troops triggered criticism among Russians, who accused the Kremlin of trying to pin responsibility on anyone but itself.

Williams said one theme he's noticed with Russia's constant "screw-ups" is Moscow's "blaming down," where military leadership tends to buck-pass responsibility to those below. This can be attributed to Russia's dependence on strong "top-down leadership," he said, adding that there's no corps of non-commissioned officers, which makes it difficult to instill good practices and behaviors. (**Comment** – Witness the constant general command upheavals defining ongoing Russian battlefield failures. Whenever there is a failure, a senior general commander is dismissed or demoted).

"It's the soldier's fault because they were using their cellphones. It's the soldier's fault because they were smoking, or the ammunition depot blew up because of people smoking where they shouldn't be smoking," Williams said, reflecting on the Russian leadership's blame game. "The blame always seems to roll down to the bottom. There never seems to be much accountability held at the top."

Beyond mismanaging cellphone usage, assuming that played a role, Russian command failures that ultimately led to such a high death toll appear to have included the physical location where the troops were stationed — within firing range of Ukrainian weapons systems and near the storage of ammunition.

Andrew Metrick, a fellow with the defense program at the Center for a New American Security, said that some elements of the incident can be attributed to declining Russian military morale and quality. But another key aspect is the inherent "fog and friction" that comes with a prolonged war, where decisions are made without too much forethought, he said. This has become a problem for Russian command.

"A huge part of military training is stalling that degradation in command and degradation in skill that happens as you become much more tired and weary," he added. **Comment** – An inherent and integral element of western military dogma is the command structure, with responsibility and battle direction delegated to subordinate commanders, from general command to field command to troop command, subject to civilian control. There is an hierarchy of command channels in these forces, instilled through vigorous and detailed training throughout a military person's career. Appointment is reserved only for those showing capability, logic and intelligence under front line pressure and adversity.

Russia, should it wish to learn from this, it will find it impossible to replicate - for decades - given it being an instrumental part of individual and general western military command structure – it will need generations of active military experience and a dramatic change in Russian training dogma. And then only once they have the qualified instructor corps to train and post recruits to higher positions of command. Never mind the change in battle thought control at Duma and Kremlin level, coupled with the further ability to counter authoritarian leadership interference. This will prove impossible in the Ukrainian theater of invasion to adapt and achieve.

Russia later went on claim that it killed hundreds of Ukrainian troops in a retaliation strike in the eastern city of Kramatorsk. But there doesn't appear to be any evidence supporting the Kremlin's narrative — journalists, local

politicians, and military personnel have all reported no signs of casualties at the site. Even the teacher at the site – a school – showed surprise that the Kremlin stated her building had been destroyed, never mind attacked.

Russian messaging on the "so-called revenge strike" shows that the government is "trying to put a positive spin on this for their population," Metrick said. It backfired though, as Russian milbloggers expressed anger with Russian military leadership after it came out that Russia's claims were made up.

Critics said that Russia's defense ministry regularly makes false claims and expressed dissatisfaction with the leadership for fabricating a story of revenge rather than addressing the failures responsible for Russian losses, according to a recent Institute for the Study of War report.

The Ukrainian strike on Makiivka is not the only time where Kyiv has been able to take advantage of Russian command failures during the nearly 11-month-long war, either. Mistakes and blunders have cost Putin's military at various stages of the conflict, including as early as the attempted capture of Kyiv.

At the tactical level, the Russians have "not always been very skillful" when fighting in Ukraine," Mark Cancian, a retired US Marine Corps colonel and a senior advisor with the CSIS security program, told Insider, and that has come as a surprise to many given that Moscow's military underwent a number of reforms after the 2008 war with Georgia.

"The Russians have shown some lack of skill at the tactical level, however, they've been able to continue their operations," Cancian said. These operations that Moscow has been able to pull off include the evacuation from over the Dnipro River in Kherson and the withdrawal from around the Kyiv area.

He said it's important to keep an eye on whether an incident like Makiivka happens again.

"War is a harsh teacher, but it does teach," Mark said. "If this is the last time we hear something like this, maybe the Russians learned their lesson and took all the cellphones away. But if we see this happen again, then that means maybe they are not picking up and disseminating these war-fighting skills."

Putin

Putin thinks the Ukraine war is 'unfair' - The late Sir Winston Churchill once suggested, "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that is fighting without them." This is no doubt a point that Putin and his lackeys now understand all too well as it is essentially facing the most powerful military alliance in the world.

In an article for Tass this week, it was noted that Western military assistance to Kyiv is already 94.9% of Russia's defense spending last year – \$51.1 billion

The article stated, "As Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized earlier... 'the military potential and capabilities of virtually all major NATO countries are being actively used against Russia.' Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu noted that Moscow is fighting not so much with the Ukrainian military as with the 'collective West.'"

Tass further tried to emphasize that Russia was at a considerable financial disadvantage on the battlefield, as foreign aid to Ukraine has exceeded \$150.8 billion, including military, humanitarian and financial support. It is absolutely true that without that aid Kyiv would have been defeated long ago "there is no way Ukraine could have fought the Russian Army largely to a standstill."

Putin may feel the situation isn't fair, but if he wanted an easy victory he should have cheated in a game of Risk.

He is constantly remarking about western assistance to a country he has illegally invaded and terrorized over a period of many years – a behavioral pattern typical of a schoolyard bully who always wants it their way – until someone steps up to confront them.

Deathly silence - A report from Russia's Samara region, where, amidst New Year celebrations, the draftees killed in Makiivka were buried quietly, so that no one would notice - Makiivka, the Ukrainian city where hundreds of Russian conscripts died on New Year's Eve, should become a household name.

When you find out who these soldiers were, how they got to the war, and why they went there, it seems that the longer the war lasts, the more "Makiivkas" are still ahead.

Before 7 January, Christmas is celebrated by the Orthodox Church, a frost of -30°C hit the Russian town of Samara, where ice playfully reflected Christmas lights, making the city look very festive.

Music was playing and people were in a hurry to have fun before the holidays were over. Amid the lights music and all this fun, an unknown number of coffins were brought to Samara on Christmas Eve. The people of Samara, pictured above, then buried their dead.

In the petrified earth, they had to urgently hollow out graves for the deceased from the Ukrainian Makiivka. How many graves? And how many perished in April, along with the cruiser Moskva? No one knows for sure. And no one will ever know given the Kremlin practice of concealing military losses.

On the night of 1 January, Ukrainian HIMARS missile strikes destroyed a building that had been turned into barracks of Russian troops in the city of Makiivka near Donetsk.

The three-story building was simply rubbed into the asphalt. According to Novaya-Europe, one of the battalions of the 44th Regiment of the 2nd Guards Combined Arms Army has been stationed there since December 17. Those mobilized in the Samara region were assigned to this regiment.

No one says the exact number of deaths. The military commissar of the Samara region announced that they would not be named: they would not publish any lists so that the secret would not be found out by Ukrainian intelligence. People in Samara themselves are trying to collect at least some information and make their own calculations.

"In December, three battalions left there," a woman whispered in my ear at the funeral of a mobilized man in the town of Novokuibyshevsk. "The first and second were sent to the front line on 28 December, I know that for sure, my neighbor's both sons were taken there." And the third battalion remained in the barracks, it seems they were waiting there until the equipment came up. They didn't even have the chance to fight.

According to the information that people in Samara tell each other, the equipment was gradually arriving in Makiivka, it was placed next to the barracks building to go into combat immediately after the holidays. Ammunition was stored inside the barracks. The ammunition detonated from the missile strikes, and the equipment caught fire. There are not even ruins left of the three-story building.

Another regiment composed of those mobilised in the Samara region — the 43rd — remains (as of 12 January) at a training base 20 kilometres from Samara. One of the battalions includes **580** people.

According to this data, it can be estimated that there was about the same number of people in the barracks in Makiivka at the time of the strike. Ukrainian intelligence claims that there were also a special forces detachment, signalmen, gunners and units of Russia's National Guard, but the regular military could spend New Year's Eve somewhere else. There is also a rumor that some of the mobilised went AWOL, and this saved their lives.

In the Ukrainian sources, there were data on **six hundred bodies** taken out from under the rubble on twelve trucks. In Samara, they do not believe this. The information that appeared in the first days after the strike has not changed yet: 89 bodies have been identified.

As it was with the cruiser Moskva, the rest of the servicemen, if they have not yet contacted their relatives, are considered missing. Compensation payments to relatives can be avoided in this case.

The Defence Ministry blamed the draftees themselves for their death, claiming they chatted on the phones and thereby caused the enemy fire.

Later, a video appeared online: a big and obviously not very young man with a disfigured face introduces himself as Anton Golovinsky and says that Colonel Yenikejev, who gathered the battalion in one hall to listen to Putin's speech, caused everyone's death. There is a postscript to the video: Anton Golovinsky died of burns shortly after recording the video.

If you call the flat where Anton Golovinsky lived, the intercom shows an error. No one has been there since September. Neighbour Lyuba, who had known Anton since childhood, confidently said: it was not him in the video. The real Golovinsky, according to her, is a young man, skinny and unhealthy. He was really mobilised in September, although the neighbour still can't understand how it happened.

"He was in a mental hospital, a drug addict," she shared. "Then he seemed to get better, got married, had two children. And in 2019, something happened to him — no one knows. He jumped out of the house, ran naked down the street, cut himself all over... I don't know how he could be drafted after that."

It is unknown where the real Anton Golovinsky is now, or whether he is alive. But Colonel Yenikejev, apparently, was not injured during the attack on the barracks. Relatives of the mobilised, who were subordinated to Yenikejev, say that on the night of 1 January, he was not in the barracks.

No one in Samara knew when and where the bodies would be taken. Later it turned out that some bodies were taken to Samara, the rest to other towns and villages from where the mobilised had been sent. This is logical: on the one hand, it is necessary to bury heroes at home, on the other — too many grieving people would not gather in one place at the same time. No one was going to arrange a general farewell to the heroes.

Alexander (name changed) went to military enlistment offices to find out where his friend was. He was mobilised in September, and nothing has been heard about him since December. But military enlistment offices give information only about relatives, and his friend has no relatives.

Comment – How does a government conceal 600 deaths from a single strike? – By splitting funerals and death notices into small, separated, unrelatable messages and burials, planning that they will go unnoticed by connection. Communal and general public grief, as happens in larger communal settings, triggers awareness of true events.

An important element arising from Novaya Gazeta interviews of relatives of the deceased and across multiple towns in Russia where burials were occurring, is how many of those being buried had civil debt they were trying to pay off. Some owed their employers money for loans taken out for family purchases, others were just bad debtors. This was their way of earning income to settle debts in Russian Main Street.

This speaks to the general situation in backyard Russia, mental illness issues, alcoholism, debt and desperation. But maybe that is all they know.

Putin hails 'positive' momentum of Russian troops in Ukraine - Putin has said that the military operation in Ukraine gained positive momentum and that he hoped his soldiers would deliver more wins after Russia claimed control of the eastern Ukrainian salt-mining town of Soledar.

"The dynamic is positive," Putin told Rossiya 1 state television when asked about the taking of Soledar. "Everything is developing within the framework of the plan of the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff."

“And I hope that our fighters will please us even more with the results of their combat,” the Russian president said.

Comment – Perhaps he was referring to his cowardly attack of a civilian residential building in Dnipro?

Battles in the east: Fighting continues in Soledar and Bakhmut ??? - Ukraine has refuted Russian claims it has captured the eastern town of Soledar. President Zelenskyy says his forces are still fighting in the small salt-mining town, which Moscow wants to secure to help its offensive on nearby Bakhmut.

The head of the Wagner mercenary group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, had accused Russia’s military establishment of trying to “steal victory” in Soledar.

Zelenskyy has called the Russian infighting “a clear sign of failure for the enemy.”

Comment – Matches proven false claim by Russia of killing 600 soldiers in Ukraine last week.

Impacts

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the G7 summit he will host in May should demonstrate a strong will to uphold the international order and rule of law after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

China is taking lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Taiwan's foreign minister says - Taiwan's foreign minister says China is likely looking at the war in Ukraine to inform a potential invasion of the island.

Russia has suffered a significant number of losses in Ukraine in recent months. Although Russia claims its forces took control of the salt-mining town of Soledar in eastern Ukraine last week, the front lines have barely budged since its last big retreat in the south two months ago.

Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu told CBC News Network's Rosemary Barton Live in an interview airing today China could be looking at Russia's military setbacks to shore up a plan to invade Taiwan.

"I think what the Chinese are learning from [the war in Ukraine] is the weakness of the Russian military so that they can strengthen themselves in their future possible attack against Taiwan," Wu told host Rosemary Barton.

"Of course, this is going to be a wrong lesson, because war means devastation."

On Wednesday, China renewed its threats to attack Taiwan and warned that foreign politicians who interact with the self-governing island are "playing with fire."

The comments came as German and Lithuanian politicians visited the island last week.

Once influential, Russian soldiers’ mothers speak softly amid Ukraine war - In late March, Russia military authorities told Irina Chistyakova that her son, a conscripted soldier, had gone missing amid the war in Ukraine, and was probably dead. She refused to accept that.

Following the example of many brave soldiers’ mothers during Russia’s wars in Chechnya, she headed down to the battlefields determined to find him. And she did.

“I traveled 25,000 kilometers [15,500 miles], in Donbas, Mariupol, Crimea. I was bombed. I visited so many morgues. No one can understand what war is until you’ve seen it yourself,” she told Russian journalists Anton Rubin and Dasha Litvishko in interviews published on their YouTube channel, Razvorot (“Reversal”).

Like many others contacted by the Monitor for this story, Ms. Chistyakova was warned that foreign journalists will distort anything she says and does not want to be quoted directly by an American newspaper. But she has detailed her

experiences to Razvorot, including a few scathing criticisms of Russia's Defense Ministry. "I was doing the work of the Defense Ministry myself. It seems that I am the only person who needs my son. And I found out where he is. He is a prisoner of war in Ukraine."

Of all the ways that citizens interface with their state, there is no relationship so fraught as war service, particularly when troops have been conscripted. Most observers say Russia's record in past wars of treating conscripts humanely and keeping families informed, especially of the worst news, has been abysmal. The impenetrable military bureaucracy and official indifference during the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan prompted the rise of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, which organized women like Ms. Chistyakova into a social force that the Kremlin couldn't ignore.

The chasm between military officials and soldiers' families persists amid the war in Ukraine. But now there is some evidence that the Russian government has realized that it needs to improve its messaging – though it is unclear whether it intends to do so primarily by positive outreach, suppression of critical voices, or a combination thereof.

"Making mistakes and then correcting them"

After their establishment during the war in Afghanistan, Russia's various Committees of Soldiers' Mothers became some of the most powerful civil society organizations Russia has ever seen. Their anti-war stance, and the strong political influence they generated, arguably played a big role in ending both that war and the first Chechnya conflict on terms unfavorable to Moscow.

By the time of the 2nd Chechnya war, in the early 2000s, the Russian state, now headed by Putin, proved far more adept at controlling the media, suppressing public protests, and also at winning the war.

The present conflict in Ukraine presents a far greater challenge, and the Kremlin has clearly given a lot of thought to ways of managing its potentially explosive relationship with the families of service members. Putin's well-publicized meeting with a selected group of soldiers' mothers on Nov. 25 was a televised attempt to get ahead of the issue, and it featured explicit promises from him that mistakes of the past would not be repeated, families would be kept informed, injustices corrected, and in the event of injury or death, compensation provided.

"I want you to know that we share this pain with you," he said. "And, of course, we will do our best, so that you do not feel forgotten, so that you feel the support."

However, Chistyakova, whose social media posts generated so much pressure for such a meeting, did not get an invite.

Though it's hard to judge effectiveness, Russia's MoD established a hotline where families inquire about a loved one serving in the war zone, and interested citizens can ask about the mobilization and other aspects of military service. Rules for how to claim the remains of a deceased soldier and obtain compensation have also been publicly spelled out.

A New Year's Eve Ukrainian missile strike on barracks near Donetsk that killed scores of newly mobilized Russian troops provided a stark test of the system. It was quickly admitted by the Defense Ministry, which assured the public that all bereaved families have been informed and will be compensated. It also triggered a major debate in Russian social media over responsibility, which got considerable traction in the wider Russian media.

The public furor over the strike has since died down, but it remains unclear how well the system worked. For example, it appears that none of the three hotline numbers that had been publicized by the Defense Ministry is functioning, after several attempts to access them on Tuesday afternoon.

The RBK news agency cited Andrei Vdovin, the military commissar of Samara, a region on the Volga, as saying that no lists of casualties from the incident will be published "due to the risk of disclosure of personal data and the threat from 'foreign intelligence'."

“They cannot close us with a screen”

The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers is still active, but far less publicly critical of authorities than in the past. One of its founders, Valentina Melnikova, agreed to talk about the group’s past, but not details of its present activities.

“We never get into military affairs. What matters to us are people,” she says. “When we meet with officials we present a concrete case based on facts and documents. We never invent things. Because of that, officials take us seriously.”

Melnikova was not invited to the meeting with Putin. “The story of soldiers’ mothers and who participated is yet another attempt to counterbalance to the Mothers,” she says. “They cannot close us with a screen. There are too many people who have problems with military service, while the state avoids direct contact or serious efforts to solve these problems.”



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A number of smaller groups have appeared, such as the Council of Mothers and Wives, whose Telegram channel has become a clearinghouse for news about missing soldiers and criticism of the authorities. But its main organizer, Olga, was also deeply reticent to be named or quoted in an American newspaper.

That is different from the past, when activists saw publicity in Western media as a way of getting the attention of their own authorities. This undoubtedly reflects a growing social mood of fear about the consequences of criticizing the war, but, in at least some cases, there appears to be a genuine mistrust of the foreign journalist’s intentions.

Experts say the dominant public attitude, at least for now, is anxious but not explicitly anti-war.

“Soldiers’ parents from the provinces – and this is where the majority of the mobilized are from – may have a skeptical attitude toward the state, but they prefer not to protest,” says Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the independent Center for Political Technologies in Moscow. “They instead turn to particular officials to seek help. You can’t appeal to officials while protesting. And sometimes they do help. Not enough, perhaps, but such connections can still work.”

Containment

UK ‘breaking through threshold of providing main battle tanks’ to Ukraine: Military expert - Military expert Samir Puri told Al Jazeera the real symbolism of the UK’s announcement of plans to offer tanks to Ukraine is that “it breaks through a threshold of providing main battle tanks from western European, North American, [and] NATO countries.”

“The main battle tank is something that Ukraine has not been given; it’s been given a lot of armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles and other vehicles that carried troops,” Puri said. “A main battle tank is a much larger gun, which the UK has said is now going to give these Challenger 2s.

“I think it is also designed to spur other NATO nations into maybe matching that kind of promise and in particular prodding the Germans around their Leopard 2 tanks to either give Leopard 2s to Ukraine, or to allow Poland to give its

Leopard 2s, which it needs to go back to Germany to ask permission to re-export to bolster Ukraine's offensive war potential," Puri said.

Russian ambassador says British tanks will be a legal target: AJ Correspondent - Al Jazeera's Ali Hashem reporting from Moscow says that one Russian ambassador has responded on Twitter to the news that the UK is sending some of its tanks to Ukraine, "saying that this will make British tanks a legal target for the Russian troops.

"However this is going to make things much more complicated for the Russians in the battlefield especially with what has been happening in the past few weeks, the setbacks that were taking place for the Russian military. This is maybe also going to take this whole confrontation to more escalation," Hashem said.

"In the past few days Russia's ambassador to the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) was saying that there is a Western insistence on defeating Russia and China and one of these battlefields is Ukraine... this is what we're expecting to hear from the Russians in the coming days.

NATO chief: More heavy weapons for Ukraine 'in the near future' - Ukraine can expect more deliveries of heavy weapons from Western countries soon, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has said in an interview with German media.

"The recent pledges for heavy warfare equipment are important, and I expect more in the near future," Stoltenberg said ahead of a meeting this week of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which coordinates arms supplies to Kyiv, at Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

As mentioned in yesterday's update, Ukraine is shortly to receive and continue receiving modern weaponry and replenishment of rounds and missiles.

This doesn't bode well for Putin and the Kremlin as it is a firm statement of intent regarding the long-term EU and US commitment to routing Russia out of Ukraine.

It is in both their interests for failing eviction of invading forces will see them on the EU doorstep and in command of central eastern Europe. Something many, many invaders have sought over millennia.



Ukrainians to take part in UK-led training: UK MoD - Ukrainian recruits are participating in a five-week United Kingdom-led training programme, the UK Ministry of Defence has announced on Twitter.

“Ukrainian recruits are participating in a 5 week UK-led training programme to prepare them to defend their homeland and to become a survivable and lethal force.”

Sanctions

Russian oil shipped to Asia in Chinese supertankers amid ship shortage - At least four Chinese-owned supertankers are shipping Russian Urals crude to China, according to trading sources and tracking data, as Moscow seeks vessels for exports after a G7 oil price cap restricted the use of Western cargo services and insurance.

China, the world’s top oil importer, has continued buying Russian oil despite Western sanctions, after Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping launched what they called a no-limit partnership before the war in Ukraine.

The sources said a fifth supertanker, or very large crude carrier (VLCC), was shipping crude to India, which like China has continued buying Russian oil sold at a discount as many Western buyers turn to other suppliers.

All five shipments were scheduled between December 22 and January 23, according to the sources and Eikon ship tracking data.

The G7 price cap introduced in December allows countries outside the European Union to import seaborne Russian oil but it prohibits shipping, insurance and re-insurance companies from handling Russian crude cargoes unless sold for below the \$60 cap.

Russia is sending Urals from its Western ports for transshipment to supertankers Lauren II, Monica S, Catalina 7 and Natalina 7, all Panama-flagged ships bound for China, while the Sao Paulo is already approaching India, according to three trading sources and Eikon data.

Based on Eikon data and public maritime databases, Lauren II is managed by China’s Greetee Co Ltd and owned by China’s Maisie Ltd, Catalina 7 is owned by Hong Kong’s Canes Venatici Ltd and Natalina 7 by Hong Kong’s Astrid Menks Ltd with both managed by China’s Runne Co Ltd, while Monica S is owned by China’s Gabrielle Ltd and managed by Derector Co Ltd. The Sao Paulo is owned and managed by Cyprus-based Rotimo Holdings Ltd.

‘Economy is stable’: Putin - After the West imposed the most severe sanctions in modern history over the war in Ukraine, Russia’s economy has shown remarkable resilience but the world’s biggest producer of natural resources is now turning increasingly towards China.

“The situation in the economy is stable,” Putin said. “Much better than not only what our opponents predicted but also what we forecast.”

Putin said unemployment was a key indicator. “Unemployment is at a historic low. Inflation is lower than expected and has, importantly, a downward trend.” **(Comment** – And about to get much lower by the impending 2nd Mobilization where young conscripts are forcefully drafted and taken from businesses all over Russia, and by raising the eligible age for enlistment from 27 to 30 years).

Russia’s economy contracted in 2022 under the weight of sanctions, but way less than most economists forecast. The \$2.14 trillion economy is forecast by the Russian government to contract by 0.8 percent in 2023.

The reader needs to take lightly whatever Russia and its leadership states and proclaims. They are proven to be chronic disinformation practitioners and twisters of fact whenever it suits their narrative.

Russian Mobilization

UK examines reports that Russia plans to change conscription age - The latest UK Ministry of Defence intelligence update examines reports Russia is planning to raise its upper limit for military conscription from 27 to 30.

The ministry says there is a realistic possibility that Russian leaders hope the change will be “less alarming” than announcing another round of the unpopular “partial mobilisation” process, which Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered in September.

According to the update, on January 12, 2023, Andrey Kartapolov, the head of the Russian State Duma Defence Committee, said the move would enable the previously announced 30 percent increase in the size of Russia’s forces.

“Last year, Putin said he supported such a move, and Russian officials are likely sounding out public reactions,” the ministry said in the update.

Geopolitics

China and South Africa’s strong ties an advantage in a new era - As 2023 began, the global community breathed a sigh of relief. We may now finally begin to look towards a post-pandemic era of rebuilding, though the re-emergent world we now share is infinitely more complex than in 2019. Global geopolitical ramifications are acutely felt today in developing economies, and as we marked the 25th anniversary of the establishment of South Africa-China diplomatic relations on January 1, the importance of our bilateral ties was reaffirmed.

The past three years have been about building resilience in South Africa, allowing us to return to growth. We are now looking to, once again, strengthening the ties that drive trade and innovation, and within this context, we approached the Asian Financial Forum 2023 in Hong Kong. Here, we are looking to reassert the incredible synergies and investment opportunities between China and South Africa. Few other platforms offer a better occasion to reconnect with the true nexus of global markets in Greater China – Hong Kong – so as to continue the successful trajectory that South Africa, the African continent and China have brought to bear over the last several decades.

This is particularly important in light of the fact that collaboration and globalization are increasingly strained in today’s world. From its citizens to its leadership, South Africa remains committed to global cooperation and shared prosperity. More than ever, South Africa has a great deal to offer, with its diverse and globally connected people, its strong financial, technology and primary industries, and its leading position and influence on the African continent.

Looking to the future, our partnership is undergirded by a long and continuous record of friendship and support. As a South African and a citizen of the African continent, I see a new era of multilateralism in which our strong partnership with China allows us the freedom and confidence to chart our own path to prosperity in an emerging global order. From the years of our struggles for liberation in the 20th century to the present day of innovation and continental-scale development, the partnership between China and South Africa is a story that will define the direction of history.

Written by Mojalefa Mogono, consul general of South Africa in Hong Kong in the South China Morning Post.