

# Conflict Update # 285

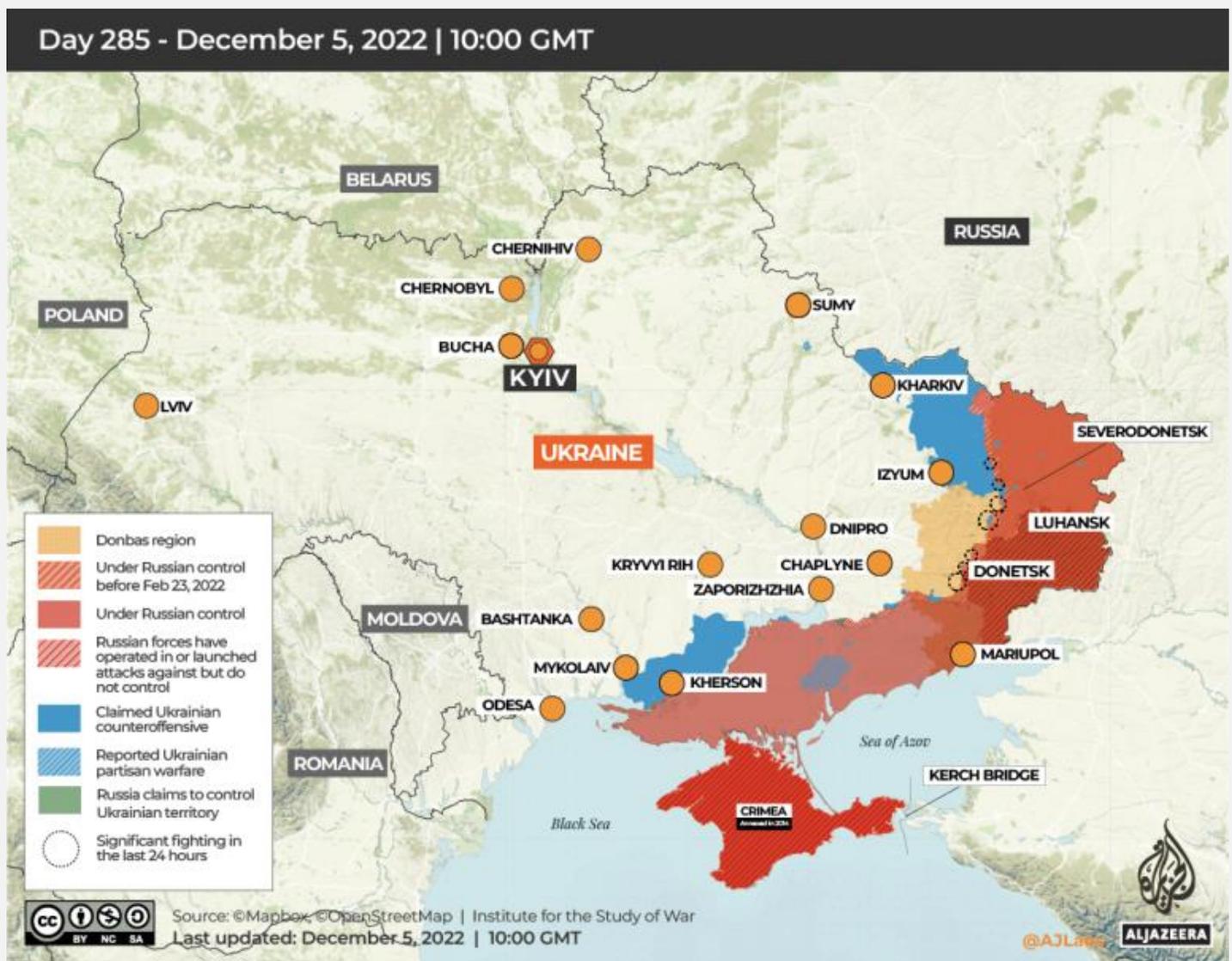
December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – 91,690 (540) soldiers killed, 2,924 (+2) enemy tanks, 5,900 (+8) armored combat vehicles, 1,914 (+6) artillery systems, 395 (+0) MLRS systems, 211 (+1) air defense systems, 286 (+5) warplanes, 264 (+1) helicopters, 1,582 (+9) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 531 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,497 (+18) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 76 fuel bowsers (+0) and 163 (+0) units of specialized equipment.

## Key Takeaways



**Ukraine destroys two Russian nuclear bombers in Nuclear base airport bombings** – Attacks carried out by Ukraine hit two nuclear military airports in Russia, reportedly destroying two nuclear bombers and causing three deaths

and six injuries, media reports claimed on Monday. According to estimates, the explosions were caused by tankers loaded with gasoline.

One of the bombed airports contained a training center for military aircraft and tanks. At the second airport, two Tu-95 nuclear bombers were hit by a drone.

The news came after Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu recently announced that in the coming year, Russia will focus on improving the infrastructure for its nuclear arsenal. His announcement came amid fears that Moscow might use nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine. Benjamin Netanyahu, the presumptive incoming Israeli prime minister, said that the chances were not zero in an interview with NBC on Sunday.



Ukraine was behind the explosions Moscow said earlier today.

The blasts at sites hundreds of miles from the border between the two countries were the result of a Ukrainian drone attack, Russia's defense ministry said, potentially signaling a new ability for Kyiv to strike far from the front lines of the conflict.

Two aircraft were lightly damaged, the ministry said in a statement, with four other people wounded. **(Comment – Russia always downplays the damage inflicted by Ukrainian attacks).**

"The Kyiv regime attempted to attack by Soviet-made UAVs the military airfields at Dyagilevo in the Ryazan region and Engels in the Saratov region in an effort to disable Russian long-range aircraft," it said, adding that the UAVS were intercepted by air defense while flying at a low altitude.

NBC News has not verified the claims and Ukraine has not taken responsibility. Both airbases are located more than 300 miles from the border.

The mysterious explosions struck Russian nuclear bases involved in launching attacks against Ukraine early today just hours before the latest barrage of Russian airstrikes forced residents in the capital, Kyiv, and cities across the country to take shelter as sirens blared.

The explosions included the Dyagilevo nuclear base near Ryazan just 150 miles from Moscow, means the war in Ukraine has come right to Putin's doorstep.

The explosions—still to be confirmed whether they were missile or drone strikes - suggest that whoever is behind them wanted to strike fear right in the heart of Russia.

The second explosion struck the Engels-2 nuclear base, from which Tu-95 bombers have been pummeling Ukraine's infrastructure over the last month.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed that Putin had been advised of the "situation" but did not speculate on who might be behind it, saying quite unbelievably that he had only "read about it" in the media, according to reporters at a briefing Monday.

**President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukrainian forces were holding positions** along the front line in the east, including near Bakhmut town, viewed as Russia's next target in its advance through the Donetsk region.

**Russia's defence ministry said its troops were conducting successful operations** in the area of Bakhmut and pushed back Ukrainian troops.

**Russian forces shelled 25 settlements** along front lines in the south, including Kherson and Nikopol – on the Ukrainian-held side of the Kakhovka reservoir, opposite the Russian-held Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.

**Anatoliy Kurtev, the secretary of the Zaporizhzhia city administration**, said Russian forces overnight hit industrial and energy infrastructure with rockets.

**The head of US intelligence said fighting in Ukraine was at a "reduced tempo"** and both militaries were looking to refit and resupply to prepare for a counteroffensive after the winter.

**Ukrainian officials have** - over the coming winter to capitalize

**Russian forces strike apartment block in Kherson** - Authorities in Kherson have released a video it said was the aftermath of the Russian shelling of a residential building. But officials said that no civilians were injured in the attack. The strike comes just weeks after Ukrainian forces have re-taken the area.

**Mobilization increases Russian military threat - Ukrainian general** - Russia's recent mobilization has increased its military threat in Ukraine, with better-trained soldiers now arriving at the front line, the commander of Ukrainian ground forces said on Monday.

But he said Russia was now using a lot of old equipment because it had no other way of replenishing supplies, and that Russian forces had made only slow progress around Bakhmut, one of the main battle zones in eastern Ukraine.

"On the eastern front, the situation is very tense, the enemy attacks our units every day," General Oleksander Syrskyy told national television.

### **New brigades, battalions**

Asked about the mobilization ordered by Moscow in September, he said: "Such a number of personnel increased the threat for us, and these are not just words -- these are new brigades, new battalions that have been trained, this is the replenishment that the army was waiting for because it was exhausted."

"Those who come now have a better level of training than those who were previously sent to the front," he said.

**Ukraine hails air defences after heavy Russian missile strikes** - Russia today rained long-range missiles on Ukraine, killing two people, destroying homes in the southeast and causing power outages, but Kyiv said its air defences had limited the damage.

Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal later said energy facilities had been hit in the regions of Kyiv, Vinnytsia in west-central Ukraine and Odesa in the south, but that Ukraine's energy system was still functioning.

The air force said that over 60 of the more than 70 missiles fired at Ukraine had been shot down.

"Our guys are awesome," Andriy Yermak, head of the Ukrainian presidential staff, wrote on Telegram.

Kyiv, a city of about 3 million people, appeared to have escaped serious damage although the Kyiv region's governor said 40% of the region's residents had been left without power after unspecified infrastructure was hit.

After an hours-long air raid alert ended, Zelenskiy told Ukrainians that air defences had "shot down most of the missiles". Kyiv officials said that nine out of 10 missiles fired at the capital had been shot down.

**Russian commander 'executed' following mass desertions of his unit** – A Russian commander has reportedly died after members of his unit deserted from the front line en masse.

Russian independent news outlet The Insider reported the death of Viktor Sevalnev, a 43-year-old ex-convict who was recruited by the Wagner Group, a mercenary outfit, for Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.

The outlet cited information it obtained from Vladimir Osechkin, a Russian human rights activist who runs the anti-corruption website Gulagu.net.

Sevalnev headed the 7th motorized rifle company of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine and had been hospitalized after sustaining injuries in battle.

The Insider said a recorded conversation between Sevalnev and his wife in November revealed that he had been threatened with execution because soldiers in his unit had deserted.

"Don't send people here...they want to kill everyone," he said in a phone call with his wife Lilia, according to the report.

"Today it's me, tomorrow another, that's all. We're just murder material [to them]. The Ministry of Defense executes people. They know that we're [dead men] and they don't give a damn," he also reportedly said.

According to the news outlet, in November, Sevalnev's unit sustained heavy losses, some soldiers were killed and the rest deserted.

His wife said she was told on December 1 that Sevalnev had died in the Donbas region on November 25 from shrapnel wounds and a powerful blow to the head.

**Russia withdraws from critical Zaporizhzhia positions amid heavy shelling** - Russia is withdrawing its troops from critical positions in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, ISW has assessed.

The withdrawal of some of Russia's forces in the southeastern region may indicate that Putin's troops are unable to hold the front line under increasing attacks from Ukraine's armed forces, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) said in its daily update of Russia's war in Ukraine on Thursday.

ISW referred to a report from the Ukrainian General Staff on Thursday that Russian forces withdrew or are currently withdrawing personnel from a number of areas in Zaporizhzhia, including Polohy, Myhailivka, and Inzhenerne.

The ISW said that in recent weeks, the Ukrainian General Staff has reported on Ukrainian strikes on the positions of Russian troops in the areas of Myrny, Tokmak, Inzhenerny, Pologiv, Yasny, and Kinsky Rozdory in the Zaporizhzhia region.

Analysts said Russian forces therefore may be withdrawing personnel from positions closer to the front line in the Zaporizhzhia region "to reduce the impact of increasing Ukrainian strikes on Russian manpower and equipment concentrations."

**As casualties rise support for war in Russia drops** - As Russia's casualties continue to mount, public opinion is changing in Russia.

"The fallout from the losses has weakened Putin's support in the public, but there is no organized or effective opposition. The losses and the disaffection are known to the government. It had hoped for a short, victorious war; instead, it got a war of attrition in which Russians are not doing well."

"Russia will lose because if their casualty rate continues as it has, pressure will build in the Russian population to leave Ukraine," Ronald Fricker, a professor of statistics at Virginia Tech said.

"Indeed, we've already seen that Russia could not sustain a military draft because many parts of the population did not support the war. That will only get worse as casualties continue to mount, and even more so if those casualties are incurred while the Russian military continues to lose ground."

**Elite Russian units take up to 40 percent casualties in Ukraine** - Troops from several elite Russian military units based along NATO's borders have suffered casualty rates of 30 to 40 percent in Moscow's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, one European defense official has said, with experienced troops now being replaced by recently mobilized reserves.

NATO defense and intelligence officials are keeping a close eye on the performance, malperformance and fortunes of key Russian units—expected to be in the vanguard of any future Russian offensive against NATO in the Baltic region—that traditionally face alliance troops across the 755-mile NATO-Russia border; soon to be extended once Finland joins the transatlantic bloc.

A European defense official who spoke with Newsweek on the condition of anonymity given the sensitivity of NATO intelligence-gathering methods revealed that groups deployed to Ukraine from three Russian formations based close to the border with Estonia and Latvia have lost between one-third and one-half of their original personnel since the invasion began on February 24.

The 76th Air Assault Division—part of the famed Russian Airborne Forces, or VDV—is based in the city of Pskov, only 40 miles from the Estonian border. Members of the 76th were responsible for "cleansing operations" in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha, in which many civilians were tortured and executed. Moscow still denies that the well-documented atrocities across occupied regions took place.

"Sub-units of the 76th Air Assault Division have been located in the areas of heavy battles: Kyiv direction, later Izyum and Kherson," the European defense official told Newsweek. "It is highly likely the division had heavy losses."

"We can assess 30 to 40 percent of the troops that deployed to the Ukraine war are wounded, missing or killed. We assess that in their home base in Pskov and Cherekha mainly conscripts, and some contractors/officers are left," they said.

There have already been rumblings about the poor fortunes of the 76th In May, Major General Veiko-Vello Palm, the deputy commander of the Estonian Defence Forces, told Newsweek that the formation "has been mainly conducting funeral processes for the soldiers that have been killed in Ukraine."

Newly-mobilized personnel forming two battalions—generally between 700 and 900 troops—began training at the 76th's home base at the start of October, the European official added. By the end of November, these units were assessed to be heading to Ukraine or towards Ukrainian borders.

Two other units are thought to have suffered similar casualty rates. The Pskov-based 2nd Special Purpose Brigade—a Spetsnaz special forces formation and part of the GRU military intelligence agency—was awarded honorary "Guards" status by Russian President Vladimir Putin in July for its actions in Ukraine.

The 25th Separate Guards Motor Rifle Brigade, a Russian Army formation based in the city of Luga, was reportedly badly mauled in the Ukrainian counteroffensive in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast, which stunned Moscow and liberated more than 500 settlements and 4,600 square miles.

Both the 2nd and 25th brigades "had heavy losses," the European defense official said. "We assess that possible losses are 30 to 40 percent."

**Russia's aircraft losses more than double Ukraine's** - Russia has reportedly lost more than double the number of aircraft compared to Ukraine since the start of the war, according to a report from a Dutch-based military blog.

As of Friday, the Kremlin's military had lost a total of 286 aircraft since Russia's late-February invasion of Ukraine, reported the open-source military tracking site Oryx. The tally includes combat aircraft, transportation vehicles and drones that have either been destroyed, damaged or captured.

In comparison, Oryx counted that the Ukrainian military had lost 129 aerial vehicles in the same time period.

Early last month, the UK MoD predicted that Russia was losing its aircraft faster than it could replace it due to its poorly trained air forces. The commander-in-chief of Ukraine's armed forces, Valeriy Zluzhnyi, also predicted at the time that Russia had lost 278 aircraft as of November 3, which was over twice what the Russian military lost during the Soviet-Afghan War from 1979 to 1989.

Oryx noted that its report is based on "destroyed aerial assets of which photo or videographic evidence or pilot death notices are available," meaning the total number of aircraft lost is predicted to be significantly higher than Friday's totals.

**Putin's military losses could reach 100,000 in 19 days** - Russia's total death toll in its war with Ukraine passed **90,000** on Friday (**Comment** – reached **91,690** as of yesterday – **1,690** over three days at an average of 563 per day), according to one estimate, pushing Putin's army into a new level of casualties caused by the ongoing conflict.

The pace of Russian losses in recent days puts Moscow on track to reach the even higher benchmark of 100,000 deaths in 19 days (**Comment** – in 15 days given new statistics), according to a Newsweek calculation.

UGS provides daily estimates of how many Russian personnel had been eliminated since the day before, as well as the total number of Russian losses since the war began on February 24. These numbers have not been verified by Russia or independently confirmed by Newsweek.

**Note** – There are higher estimates of Russian soldiers killed in fighting than what Ukraine's UGS reports, but we include only the latter as they are reportedly confirmed deaths which Ukrainian troops tally from in situ evidence and from identity papers retrieved from fallen Russian soldiers).

**Russian jets just keep crashing** – A Mikoyan MiG-31 fighter jet crashed shortly after take-off in the latest incident to befall a Russian aircraft crew since the start of the war in Ukraine.

Russian media outlets reported that the plane crashed in a forest near the village of Alekseevka, around 40 miles from Vladivostok in Russia's far east, on Friday.

The crew ejected, but their condition is not yet known,

and no casualties have been reported.

There have been a number of non-combat Ukraine. In October, independent media outlet crashed since the start of the war.

aviation losses since the start of Moscow's invasion of The Bell reported that at least ten aircraft had

Video widely shared on social media showed the the Belbek airfield in Sevastopol, with one local

moment a Mig-31 crashed soon after takeoff from report saying that a pilot had not ejected in time.

Also in October, video went viral of a Sukhoi Su-25 jet before it crashed in an military transport plane crashed and caught attempting an emergency landing due to an

pilot reportedly ejecting from a Russian unknown area. In June, an Ilyushin Il-76 fire near the city of Ryazan after engine malfunction on a training flight.

At the time, the British defense ministry said Ukraine with sufficient aircrew.

Russia's air force was struggling to support the invasion of



The defense officials also said Moscow was relying on retired personnel who are now working as contractors for the private military company Wagner to conduct close air support missions.

"I think the issue is with the maintenance rather than the pilots but then again the pilots may not have had sufficient training either," Glen Grant, a military analyst with the Baltic Security Foundation, told Newsweek. "Before the war started, the amount of training the pilots were getting was minimal."

**Putin better informed now about Ukraine war, says US** - The head of US intelligence has said Putin has "become better informed" about the difficulties facing his invading forces in Ukraine, as the Kremlin suggested the Russian president could visit the occupied Donbas region at a future unspecified date.

Speaking at a defence forum late on Saturday, Avril Haines, the US director of national intelligence, indicated Putin was no longer as insulated from bad news about the conditions facing his invasion of Ukraine as he was earlier in the campaign.

Alluding to past assessments that Putin's advisers could be shielding him from bad news, Haines said he was "becoming more informed of the challenges that the military faces."

"But it's still not clear to us that he has a full picture of at this stage of just how challenged they are," she said, addressing an audience at the Reagan National Defense Forum in California.

Haines's comments reflect a wider internalization of Russian military failures in Ukraine that has increasingly been reflected in remarks made by key regime propagandists, in public opinion polling and in analysis by the Russian military blogger community.

The scale of the challenges facing the Russian president have also been underlined by a series of battlefield setbacks in recent months that have led to the Russians retreating from the Kharkiv region, from Kherson oblast – including the key city of the same name – and from parts of the Russian-occupied Donbas region.

Although Moscow has responded by attacking key Ukrainian civilian energy infrastructure in an attempt to freeze Kyiv into concessions, that campaign, too, has had only a partial impact as Ukrainian engineers have moved quickly to repair damaged power plants and western allies have sent emergency generating plants to help disperse Ukraine's energy network.

The Kremlin's vague comments about a potential Putin visit, made on Saturday, appeared designed more for public consumption in Russia than indicating that any visit was imminent.

Making the remarks to Russian news agencies, the Kremlin press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, said of any Putin visit: "In due time, this will happen, of course. This is a region of the Russian Federation."

## Diplomacy

French President Emmanuel Macron drew criticism from Ukraine and its Baltic allies for suggesting the West should consider Russia's need for "security guarantees" if it agrees to talks to end the war.

Lithuania's former foreign minister, Linas Linkevicius, said Russia has security guarantees as long as it does not "attack, annex or occupy" its neighbours.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is not sincere about peace negotiations with Ukraine while he is taking the war to a new level of "barbarism" by attacking civilian infrastructure, a US diplomat said.

The Kremlin said the West must recognize Moscow's declared annexation in September of "new territories" before any talks with Putin.

## Russian Mobilization

**Russian refuseniks continue to rebel, hundreds jailed for defying orders** – A growing number of Russian men mobilized to fight in Ukraine are rebelling, with hundreds reportedly detained in recent weeks for defying orders from their military commanders.

Citing local independent media outlets, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), a U.S. think tank, said in its daily update on Russia's war in Ukraine on Sunday that Russian mobilized soldiers are reportedly continuing to challenge the defense ministry's control over its forces.

The think tank noted that ASTRA, an independent Russian news outlet, had interviewed a mobilized soldier held in a basement alongside other Russian soldiers who refused to fight in Zavtine Bazhannia, in the Donetsk Oblast.

The soldier interviewed by ASTRA, Mikhail Nosov, said he was mobilized on September 23, two days after President Vladimir Putin announced a partial mobilization of the population.

"As a result of tactical and strategic miscalculations by the higher command, constant lies to my own subordinates, insufficient medical and material support, my confidence in the commanders was shaken," he said in a statement to Russia's Investigative Committee.

**Putin drafting occupied Ukrainians could fuel 'mutiny,' desertions** - Potential Russian efforts to draft Ukrainians to fight against their own country in the ongoing war could raise the risks of desertions, defections and even "mutiny," according to experts.

UGS said in an operational update Thursday that Russia was preparing a draft law that would legalize conscripting Ukrainians who currently live in Russian-occupied territories and have received a Russian passport. The update said that the law would legalize drafting Ukrainians who meet this criteria from the spring of 2023.

**Russia military losses could be double US in Vietnam in tenth of time** - Tens of thousands of Russian soldiers are now believed to have been killed in its war with Ukraine—a figure that is expected to impact the nation for decades to come. While exact figures are unconfirmed, it is thought Russia's military losses are double the number of U.S. servicemen who died in Vietnam in one tenth of the time.

"In terms of the number of deaths from a Russian perspective, one comparison is the effect the Vietnam War had on the United States," Ronald Fricker, a professor of statistics at Virginia Tech, told Newsweek. "In that conflict, slightly more than 58,000 U.S. service members died, most occurring over the timespan of about a decade. For those of us old enough to remember it, that war caused substantial societal impacts.

"Of course, Russia in 2022 is not at all like the United States in the late '60s and early '70s, but it is also clear from news reports that this war is not popular with key segments of the Russian population. Combine that with a casualty rate roughly double Vietnam's that has occurred over about one tenth of the time, and I am of the opinion that we have yet to see the war's full impacts played out in Russian society."

## Peace Talks

"We need to work on what could lead to a peace agreement," said Macron to reporters Thursday at the White House. "But it is for [President Zelenskyy] to tell us when the time comes and what the choices of the Ukrainians are."

**"Let me choose my words very carefully,"** said President Biden while standing beside Macron on Thursday. "I'm prepared to speak with Mr. Putin if in fact there is an interest in him deciding he's looking for a way to end the war. He hasn't done that yet. If that's the case, in consultation with my French and my NATO friends, I'll be happy to sit down with Putin to see what he wants [or] has in mind." However, Biden said, "He hasn't done that yet."

**But Macron had more to say over the weekend,** telling French TV in an interview, e.g., "We need to prepare what we are ready to do, how we protect our allies and member states, and how to give guarantees to Russia the day it returns to the negotiating table."

**Lithuania's foreign minister was not at all pleased** with that openness to negotiate with Putin any time soon. "Russia shouldn't get invited to 'peace' negotiations as a reward for brutally invading, occupying and murdering its neighbours again and again," Gabrielius Landsbergis tweeted Sunday. "That isn't how the rules-based international order works," he said, and also suggested perhaps some international institutions ought to be altered or removed entirely to account for this "new" phase of international relations brought about by Putin's Ukraine invasion.

**"Some even suggest Ukrainian territorial concessions to the invaders as a gift,"** Landsbergis added, and noted his strong disagreement. "First Russia has to face defeat on the battlefield. For that Ukraine needs all our help," he said. And that means "All the weapons, all the assistance we can give. Otherwise Russia will continue trying to reinvent the continent according to its own imperialist world vision."

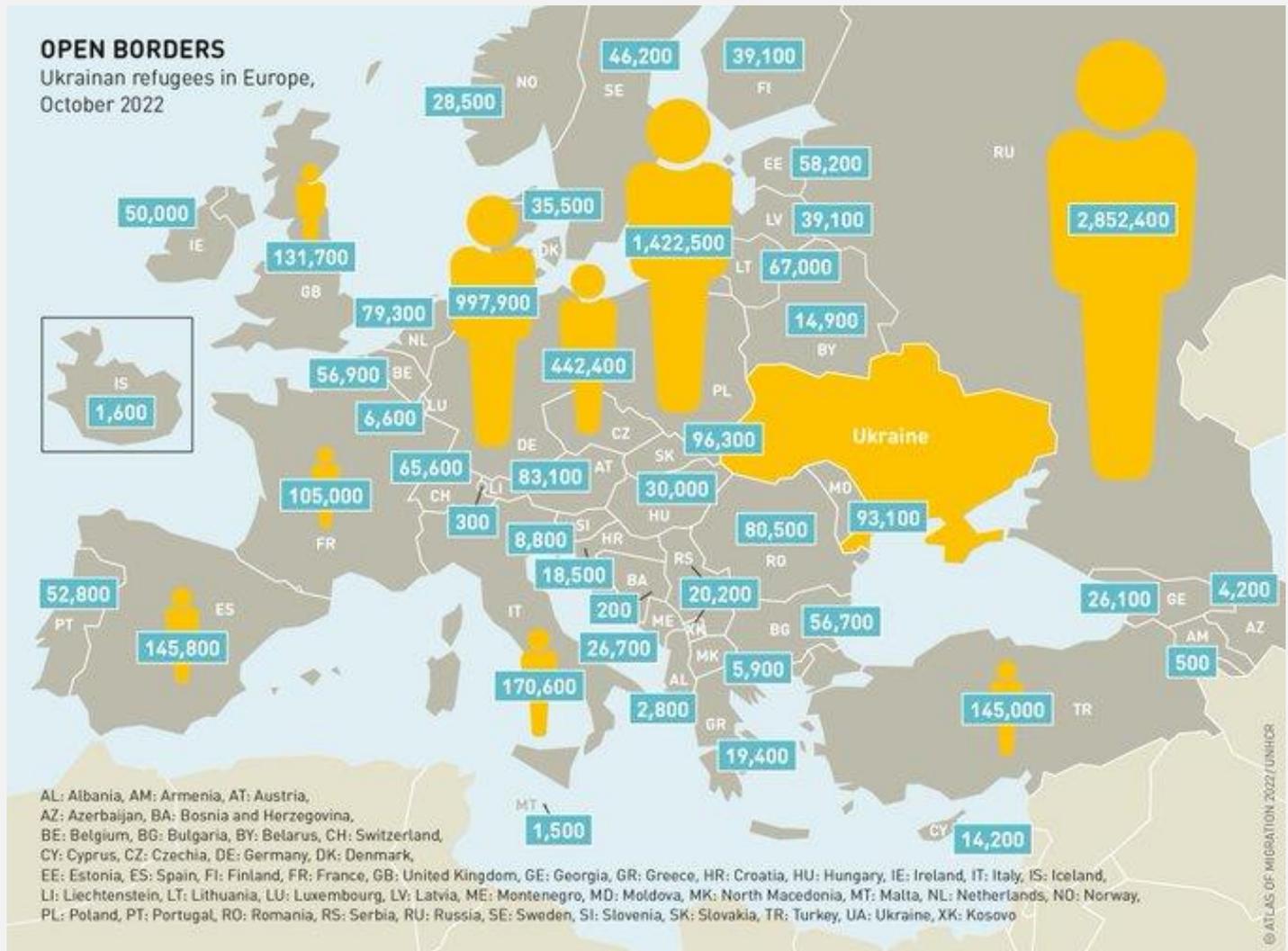
**"It is in Europe's interest to fight off and defeat the invader,"** he said, and—flagging the League of Nations' failure to prevent World War II—added, "After this defeat a new system needs to be created out of the lessons learnt from previous mistakes...And we should start creating this new system with Ukraine, not with Putin's Russia."

**Finland's former prime minister said he "fundamentally disagree[s]" with Macron,** too, writing on Twitter Sunday, "The only security guarantees we should focus on are essentially non-Russian," said Alexander Stubb. "Russia needs first to guarantee that it does not attack others. Only then can we begin discussions on Eur[opean] Sec[urity]."

**To be clear, Russian leader Vladimir Putin "has not changed his political objectives" for invading Ukraine,** U.S. Director for National Intelligence Avril Haines said this weekend at the annual Reagan National Defense Forum in Simi Valley, Calif. And at any rate, she noted, the U.S. and its allies don't see any interest from Ukraine's military in halting its counter offensives against the Russian occupiers.

# Humanitarian

**Migration out of Ukraine** - Migration out of both Ukraine and Russia will have long-lasting effects on their societies too. Some 7.6 million Ukrainians have fled their country in the wake of the war, according to UN data, while up to 1.6 million having been forcibly deported from their homes after Russian forces took control in their areas.



Hundreds of thousands of Russians are leaving their country, both in protest and to avoid being conscripted to fight. Many have fled to Kazakhstan, Serbia, Turkey, Georgia, and Finland. This loss of person-power can negatively impact population health by compromising the health service in Russia, which can quickly cause a large number of deaths in soldiers in need, as well as regular citizens.

"However large the real figure of dead and wounded in Russia [may be] from the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, tens of thousands of families are suffering and grieving," Ronald Suny, a professor of history and political science at the University of Michigan, told Newsweek.

"The fallout from the losses has weakened Putin's support in the public, but there is no organized or effective opposition. The losses and the disaffection are known to the government. It had hoped for a short, victorious war; instead, it got a war of attrition in which Russians are not doing well."

**Russia trying to hide Mariupol war crimes** - New satellite imagery from Maxar reveals Russian military efforts to hide and move beyond some of the destruction its rockets dealt across Ukraine's port city of Mariupol. For example, there seems to be some kind of tall obstructing wall that's been installed around the theater Russian airstrikes destroyed in mid-March.

## Sanctions

**Russia's economic prospects have gone from bad to terrible** - Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Ukrainian resistance to that invasion remains the most significant international event of 2022. Beyond the military implications, the invasion has created millions of Ukrainian refugees, caused many men of military-age to leave Russia, affected food and energy supplies and changed the Russian economy.

Putin and his team certainly understand that the war has not gone according to plan. Two key moments stand out: the decision to withdraw units attacking Kyiv in March and April and the decision to announce a so-called "partial mobilization" in September. In the first case, Putin had to give up on his goal of quickly toppling the Ukrainian government. In the second case, he had to acknowledge that Russian casualties (killed and wounded) were so immense in the first seven months of the war that Russia needed hundreds of thousands of new troops to stabilize the front.

That said, Putin and his military and security elites—known collectively as the siloviki—still do not believe that Russia has lost the war. They hope to outlast Ukraine and the West by mobilizing more troops, inflicting enormous suffering during the winter on the Ukrainian population by targeting civilian infrastructure, and waiting for collective Western support for Ukraine to splinter and fall apart.

The biggest economic problem that Russia and Russians face today is, of course, the war. Instead of an expected growth of around 4% for 2022-2023, Russia's economy is expected to decline by 8% over those two years. Sanctions have hit production in key sectors very hard, and the effects will continue to mount. The government is shifting to a wartime economy, which means even more state control and military spending and less investment in human capital such as education and health care.

Hundreds of thousands of educated, young workers have left the country, and several hundred thousand more Russian citizens have been mobilized for war rather than productive pursuits—not to mention the roughly 100,000 casualties so far. Living standards will continue to fall, and an increase in wage arrears and unemployment seems inevitable as well. Longer term, the Western shift away from Russian oil and gas brought on by the war will undermine Russia's most important economic sector.

The Russian economy has been underperforming for 15 years due to poor institutions—weak rule of law, poor protection of property rights, corruption—and consequentially relatively low domestic and foreign investment. Now due to the war, Russian economic prospects have gone from lackluster to dreadful.

Russia has openly broadcast on TV that it is taking Ukrainian children to Russia, which many people consider kidnapping. These actions are perfectly consistent with Kremlin messaging about the war. In Putin's own words, Russians and Ukrainians are "one people." He cannot even imagine that Ukraine would choose to align with the West unless it was somehow tricked or coerced into doing so.

When he launched the February invasion, he asserted that Ukraine was ruled by a "neo-Nazi" government that was committing "genocide" against its own people. Thus, the Russian state portrays these kidnappings not as a war crime but as a benevolent act to rescue endangered children from an evil illegitimate government in Kyiv. It's nonsense, of course, but that doesn't mean the views are not seriously held by both Russian state officials and the Russian families who say they are "adopting" these children.

Putin's Russia promotes a weird mishmash of symbols and identities. In his long speech justifying the February invasion, he bitterly denounced Lenin for creating the Soviet Republic of Ukraine, which he considers an artificial construction.

Yet in other settings and circumstances, he fully embraces Soviet history and symbols. The way to make sense of this is to understand Putin as someone who believes in the imperial Russian myth of 1,000 years of continuous Russian history. For him, pre-revolutionary Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and post-Soviet Russia are all part of a single story of "historic Russia" and its rightful status as a Great Power.

Of course, Russia is not the only country that tells a story about itself that is at odds with a much more complicated historical reality. This war is a tragic reminder of the potential dangers when myths of imperial greatness serve as a guide to contemporary foreign policy.

Putin has made clear for many years that he does not think Ukraine is "even a state," as he told George W. Bush in 2008. This war—which goes back to 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea—stems directly from Putin's refusal to see Ukraine as a sovereign state with the freedom to make its own political and foreign policy decisions.

In his view, Ukraine must be in Russia's "sphere of control," as Fiona Hill and Angela Stent put it. Just two months ago, he forcibly asserted that he was annexing four regions of Ukraine that, according to international law and multiple agreements between Russia and Ukraine, are legitimately part of Ukraine. If Putin wants to end the war, there is nothing stopping him from pulling Russian forces back to Russia's legitimate international borders.

**Oil price cap** - A European Union, G7, and Australian price cap on Russian seaborne oil came into force as the West tries to limit Moscow's ability to finance its war in Ukraine.

Russia called the measure "dangerous" and said it will not sell oil to any nation that abides by the policy, even if it has to cut production.

The \$60 per barrel price cap on Russian crude came after EU members overcame resistance from Poland.

The \$60 price cap is not serious and will do little to deter Russia from waging its war, Zelenskyy said.

Russia said it would continue to find buyers for its oil, including China and India.

**Greece, Bulgaria discuss oil pipeline bypassing Bosphorus Strait** - A European Union embargo on Russian oil that takes effect on Monday has led Greece and Bulgaria to talk about reviving a long-defunct oil pipeline project that bypasses the Bosphorus Strait.

The pipeline would run 280km (about 174 miles) from the port of Alexandroupolis on the Aegean Sea to the port of Burgas on the Black Sea and might continue as far north as the port of Constanza in Romania, Bulgaria's Energy Minister Roman Hristov told Al Jazeera.

**Greece-North Macedonia pipeline** - Greece is in discussions with North Macedonia to build a separate gas pipeline to that country.

Greece, which plans to export 8.5 billion cubic metres of gas to the Balkans by 2025, is fast becoming the main supplier of non-Russian gas to the region.

The Burgas-Alexandroupolis oil pipeline would add another dimension to its role as a provider of energy security.

Turkey, too, has acquired geopolitical weight as Russian energy is gradually dislodged from Eastern Europe. Three Russian gas pipelines already enter Turkey.

**Serbia now has no choice but to join EU sanctions on Russia** - Last month, Serbia and Azerbaijan signed bilateral memorandums of understanding to expand cooperation on energy, developing and further strengthening the gas and electricity agreements made earlier this year. While at first glance this may seem to be of peripheral interest to contemporary geopolitics, the agreements could have broad implications for the European Union.

From the Brussels point of view, Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev is a useful ally. Last July, he signed on to a strategic partnership with the EU by agreeing to increase the gas supply to EU nations by 50 percent (from 8.1 billion cubic meters (bcm) in 2021 to 12 bcm by the end of 2022) with more to come on stream later.

President Aliyev has now shown himself willing to follow through on the partnership by supplying gas and electricity to EU aspirant Serbia to meet most of its needs as well.

In so doing, two birds are struck with one stone — and the EU will be pleased with both.

In the case of Serbia, Azerbaijan's position removes with a single stroke the reason most often cited by that country's president, Aleksandar Vucic, for refusing to take part in the EU's sanctions against Russia. Namely, that if he joins the ranks of those opposed to Moscow's war of aggression, Serbia will run out of gas, and fast.

With Azerbaijan plugging this gap, once the interconnecting pipeline from Bulgaria to Serbia is complete next year, Belgrade will have no excuse but to finally follow the EU's lead and join efforts to punish Russia for invading Ukraine.

At that point, the EU will insist Serbia's hapless president risk the wrath of Vladimir Putin and tie his colors to the Western mast.

It may not be such a hard sell. Putin himself is somewhat suspicious of Serbia's leader, as are most who deal with the opaque Vucic. Whereas neighboring Hungary under prime minister Viktor Orban has been given a 25-year contract on favourable terms, the Russian leader has preferred to keep his Serbian counterpart compliant via a tight rein of annually-reviewed gas pricing.

Brussels and Berlin have an extra reason for wanting to separate the two.

Where Serbia goes, neighboring Bosnia is likely to follow. The restive Republika Srpska entity within Bosnia, which has previously blocked anti-Putin proposals in the Bosnian context, will not want to be the only holdout.

With Serbia and Bosnia on board the great ship of sanctions, the EU will have achieved almost total policy consensus on the continent for its stand regarding Russia — something it has sought to do since the invasion began. Only Russia, obviously, and its ally Belarus, naturally, will remain as the outliers.

However, Rome was not built in a day. Neither will Belgrade's compliance be easily secured.