

# Conflict Update # 358

February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023

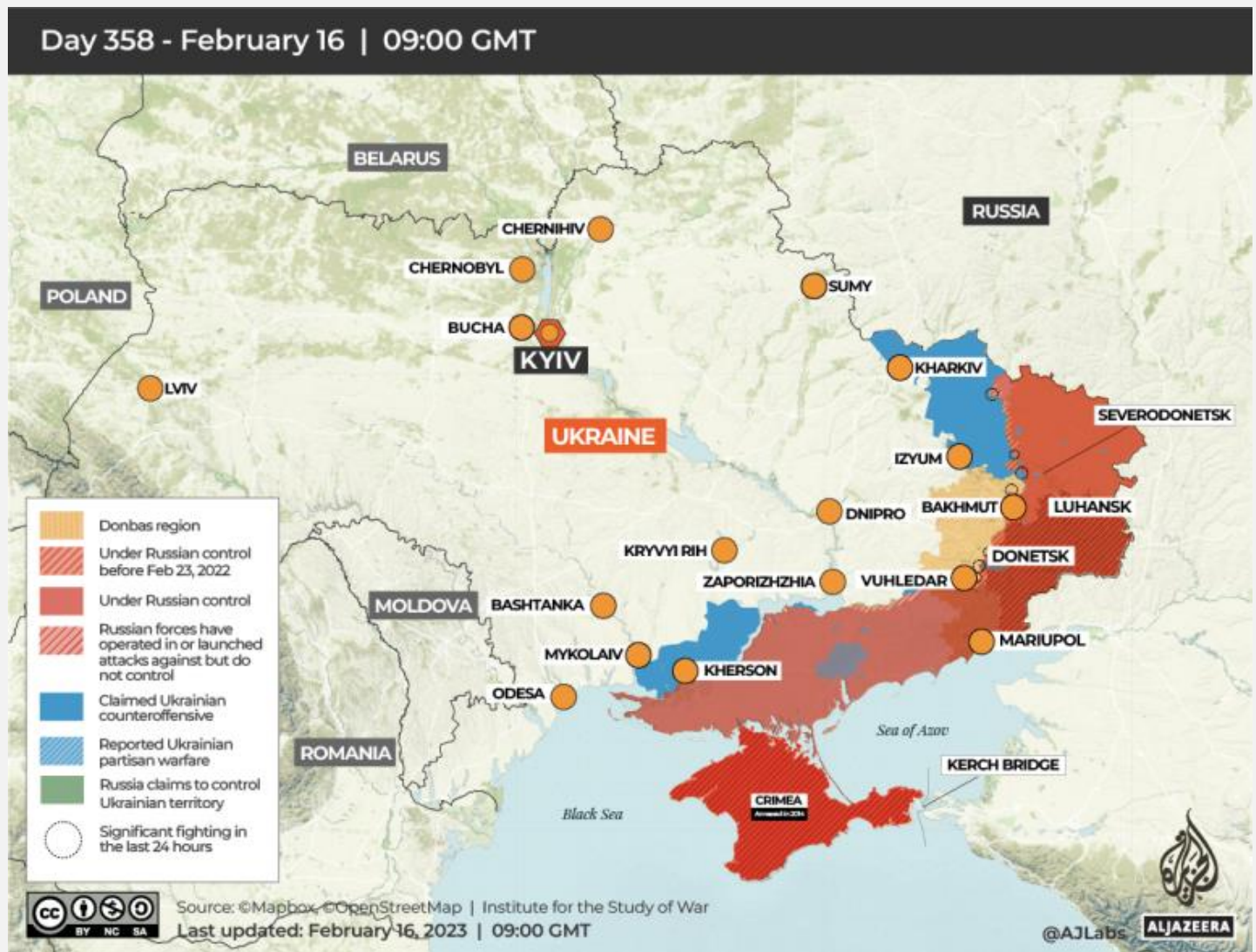
Back issues at [www.accgroupco.com](http://www.accgroupco.com)

## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – 140,460 (690) soldiers killed, 3,296 (+6) enemy tanks, 6,517 (+10) armored combat vehicles, 2,306 (+3) artillery systems, 466 (+0) MLRS systems, 239 (+3) air defense systems, 298 (+0) warplanes, 287 (+1) helicopters, 2,012 (+1) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 857 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,167 (+6) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 219 (+0) units of equipment.

**Ukrainian losses** – Without official numbers, it is believed between 30,000 and 40,000 Ukrainian soldiers have died thus far in the war.

## Key Takeaways



**Russian army has lost up to half of key battle tanks, analysts estimate** - Russia's army is estimated to have lost nearly 40% of its prewar fleet of tanks after nine months of fighting in Ukraine, according to a count by the specialist thinktank the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS).

That rises to as much as 50% for some of the key tanks used in combat, forcing Russia to reach into its still sizeable cold war-era stocks. Ukraine's tank numbers are estimated to have increased because of the number it has captured and supplies of Soviet-era tanks from its western allies.

John Chipman, the thinktank's chair, said the war had been "a political and military failure for Russia" highlighting shortcomings in leadership and deficiencies in its munitions, despite Kremlin modernisation efforts.

"Russia's actions over the past year have raised questions not only over the competence of its military and senior military leadership, but also over command cohesion," he added, launching the IISS's annual Military Balance audit of the world's armed forces.

The thinktank's figures are based largely on open source images from drones, satellites and on the battlefield, running from the beginning of the war to the end of November, although the conflict means numbers can only be estimated.

Its headline count is that Russia's number of tanks in its army have dropped by 38% from 2,927 to 1,800, while there have been particularly heavy losses of its workhorse T-72B3, an upgrade first delivered its army in 2013.

**Russia's rare thermobaric rocket launcher taken out by Ukraine** – A new video has captured the moment a Russian thermobaric multiple rocket launcher system burst into flames after being targeted in eastern Ukraine.



The video, which was shared by Belarusian news outlet Nexta on Telegram, showed the destruction of a Russian TOS-1 or TOS-1A in the Donbas region.

Russian forces are known to have used the TOS-1A during Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Oksana Markarova, the Ukrainian ambassador to the U.S., said within days of the invasion that thermobaric weapons, also known as "vacuum bombs," had been used in Ukraine. Within weeks of the start of the invasion Western defense ministries confirmed the use of the TOS-1A system in Ukraine.

In early February 2023, the Critical Threats project said Russian forces had been using the TOS-1A thermobarbic artillery system on the Donetsk front lines.

The use of such artillery systems near the contested town of Vuhledar indicated Russian forces' "relative prioritization of this area," it said. In late 2022 footage also emerged of TOS-1 multiple rocket launchers reportedly being used around the Donetsk city of Bakhmut.

Thermobaric weapons use oxygen to create a high-temperature explosion. A second charge ignites after the initial explosion and can have a "devastating" impact, according to the British defense ministry.

The explosive produces a "rapidly-expanding fireball explosion" with no shrapnel, defense and military technology expert David Hambling told Newsweek. The TOS-1 causes an "extremely powerful shock wave which can shatter buildings," which often helps identify when it has been used, he added.

Classified by the Russian military as flame-throwers, rather than artillery systems, the function of the TOS-1 and TOS-1A is to lob a huge weight of explosive over a short range. They are designed to be used against trenches, bunkers and fortifications, Hambling said.

They are a "high-priority item" for the Russian military, and prove "highly effective" against dug-in troops, he added. It would be more unusual to see them used against tanks or infantry out in the open and Russia only has a "small number" of these launchers, Hambling stressed.

**“Catastrophic” Russian casualties in Vuhledar, Ukraine** - Ukrainian forces have made significant gains in the Vuhledar region in recent days.

An update from the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, said on Monday that Putin announced on Russian state television that his naval infantry is “working as it should” at this point and thanked the Pacific and Northern fleets for “heroically fighting.”

The think tank suggested that Putin’s nod to the Pacific and Northern fleets was deliberate, with the Russian leader acutely aware of the many well-documented and significant losses to the “mechanized elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet in their assault on Vuhledar.”

Meanwhile, the Russian Ministry of Defense has stayed quiet about the losses in Vuhledar. Russian officials previously expressed optimism that troops would successfully take control of the city.

The ISW believes that Putin is “deliberately doubling down” on his defense ministry’s optimistic view of the situation in Vuhledar.

Putin’s thinking, think tank suggests, is that ground can be regained in an upcoming major new offensive in Donetsk Oblast.

**Putin puts on a brave face over Vuhledar disaster** - Putin is putting on a brave face as troops continue to suffer "catastrophic casualties" around the Vuhledar region in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk oblast, a US think tank has said.

Vuhledar has seen intense clashes in recent weeks, as Russian troops attempt to seize the town, something that a Kremlin-appointed official has said may turn the war in Moscow's favor.

ISW, a think tank based in Washington D.C., noted in its daily assessment of the conflict that Putin said on a Russian state TV show recorded on February 9 and broadcast on February 12 that Russian "naval infantry is working as it should right now." He added that the Pacific and Northern fleets are "heroically fighting."

According to the think tank, Putin "likely deliberately praised his Pacific and Northern fleets against the backdrop of highly publicized and substantial losses to mechanized elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet in their assault on Vuhledar."

"Putin is likely deliberately doubling down on the Russian MoD's extremely overly optimistic description of the Vuhledar frontline to sustain the narrative of an imminent and sweeping major Russian offensive in Donetsk Oblast," the think tank observed.

**Wagner boss shifts Bakhmut expectations as Ukraine holds on** - Russia could encircle the war-ravaged city of Bakhmut in Ukraine's Donetsk region by March or April, according to a new assessment by Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner Group, which has been leading an offensive alongside Russian troops against the city since July.

In video interviews with Russian media published late on February 15, Prigozhin, who has been sidelined by the Kremlin in recent weeks, appeared to shift expectations on the potential capture of Bakhmut.

Prigozhin blasted Russia's "monstrous military bureaucracy" for its failure to seize the city before the end of last year, and warned that Russia should not underestimate or play down Ukraine's armed forces by saying that Bakhmut is "surrounded."

He said his best guess for possible encirclement of the industrial city is in March or April, although new weapon deliveries by Western allies to Ukraine will have a significant impact on his assessment.

"If they are not surrounded, why should we say they are? We shouldn't downplay the enemy in this," he said.

**Comment** – There is growing hostility between the Wagner Group leader and the Kremlin, so these comments need to be viewed in context of this factor where it pays the former to discredit the latter's performance in the field.

**Russia has spent 9 months bleeding troops to try to capture a city with limited strategic value, experts say** - Russia has spent nine months trying to capture Bakhmut in a slow and brutal campaign. Experts say the city does not even have that much strategic value. But it has huge symbolic weight for both sides, so they keep throwing resources at it. Russian forces have been fighting for nine months to take the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, in one of the longest and bloodiest battles of the war.

But the city appears to have limited strategic importance to Russia's war effort, with the country seemingly committed to the grinding battle in an effort to gain a symbolic victory after months of losses and stalemates, experts say.

Russia has been slowly gaining ground in the city, with the BBC reporting its forces had effective control of both of the main roads that go into the city. But it could be a Pyrrhic victory. Capturing Bakhmut would have "limited operational value" for Russia, and its efforts have been "disproportionately costly" compared to the access it would gain from a victory, the UK Ministry of Defence said in December.

**Comment** – I was watching geolocation footage last night of the battle in and around Bakhmut, and Ukrainian forces were shown to be moving Russian regiments back from areas previously occupied by the invading troops. It is a fluid situation but, as mentioned in earlier Updates, by holding Russian forces in this area, Ukraine achieves other objectives by locking them down and forcing the Kremlin to keep injecting fresh conscripts into the area.

**US warns about Russia's war planes amid emerging offensive** - The US two days ago cautioned that Russia still has a strong air force, underscoring the need to provide Ukraine with further support as Russia's assault continues in the eastern region of Donbas.

Security officials from more than 50 countries meeting in Brussels to coordinate assistance to Kyiv discussed providing Ukraine with more artillery, ammunition and armor — but especially air defenses amid worries about Russian jets.

“Although the Russian capabilities — the land forces — are very demoralized, very, very ragged, very depleted, the Russians still have a pretty significant air force,” said a senior U.S. administration official who was not authorized to speak publicly.

**Western nations accelerate air defense to Ukraine as Russia launches new offensive** - Leaders from a coalition of more than 50 countries that send weapons to Ukraine met to discuss accelerating their assistance. Russian forces have launched fresh offensives in Ukraine’s east and there are concerns about the ability to withstand the attacks.

**Russia today launched missile attacks across Ukraine,** Ukrainian officials said, after Western allies pledged to ramp up military aid to the Ukrainian armed forces to support a planned counteroffensive.

**Ukrainian officials said air defences in the south downed eight Kalibr missiles** fired from a ship in the Black Sea, but other missiles struck northern and western Ukraine as well as the central regions of Dnipro and Kirovohrad.

**Russia earlier said it had broken through two fortified defence lines in** Ukraine’s east as it continued attacks on Ukrainian positions in the east.

**Ukrainian forces have repelled** some Russian attacks but the situation remains difficult, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s office said on Wednesday.

**Russian forces have launched attacks on several settlements,** including Paraskoviivka on the northern approaches to Bakhmut, and on Opytne and Klishchiivka villages on its southern approaches, Ukrainian military said.

**Meanwhile, six Russian balloons were spotted** over Kyiv and most were shot down after being engaged by air defences, the capital’s military administration said.

**Tensions mount at the Belarus-Ukraine border amid concerns of a Russian spring offensive** - Tensions are mounting at the border between Ukraine and Moscow-allied Belarus, as officials in Kyiv warn of a Russian spring offensive amid ramped-up military attacks from the Kremlin.

In rare access since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last year, a CNN team visited Belarus’s southwest border near northwest Ukraine, accompanied by state border officials.

Ukraine shares a 1,000-kilometer frontier with Belarus, a country that has played a key role in aiding Russia’s attack.

CNN’s Frederik Pleitgen and his team were 100 meters away from the Ukrainian side, where they saw the Belarusian government’s fortification of the border area with barbed wire.

According to the CNN team on the ground, the Ukrainian side of the border is heavily barricaded with several layers of barbed wire and earth mounds to stop anyone from going through.

Belarusian officials told CNN the border crossing from their side in the small town of Dyvin is still functioning but that the Ukrainian side has closed the crossing.

**Belarus threatens to join war if attacked** – Today in Minsk, Mr Lukashenko took questions from a small group of foreign media, including the BBC.

"Last year you allowed your country to be used as a staging ground for Russia's invasion," I reminded Mr Lukashenko. "Are you prepared to do so again?"

"Yes, I'm ready," he replied. "I'm ready to provide [territory] again. I'm also ready to wage war, alongside the Russians, from the territory of Belarus. But only if someone - even a single soldier - enters our territory from there (Ukraine) with weapons to kill my people."

Military co-operation between Russia and Belarus has been on the increase, with joint drills and the formation of a joint military grouping. But so far the Belarusian leader has avoided sending his troops into Ukraine to fight alongside Russian forces.

The UK, EU and the United States do not recognise Alexander Lukashenko as the legitimate president of Belarus. In 2020 Belarusians poured on to the streets to accuse him of stealing the country's presidential election. The protests were brutally suppressed.

Lukashenko used Thursday's event to blame the West for the war in Ukraine.

He accused Western governments of fueling the conflict and engaged in a touch of Putinesque nuclear sabre-rattling.

"If you continue this escalation, you will get nuclear weapons and Russia has more than anyone," he said.

"So, you should stop this. If a nuclear war starts, Belarus will cease to exist. We need to sit down at the negotiating table, because nuclear war will wipe out the USA too. No-one needs this."

Having facilitated the Russian invasion of Ukraine one year ago, the Belarusian leader now claims he can help negotiate peace.

Mr Lukashenko suggested that next week would be a good time to start, with US President Joe Biden due to visit Poland.

**Comment** – Absolutely farcical - allowing a country's territory to be used as an active launching pad for an invasion of a neighboring state is an act of war and means that Belarus is, yes, at war with Ukraine. So Lukashenko should quit his posturing and wait for what is surely coming his and Belarus' way.

**Russia surrounds Bakhmut as Ukraine sends in troops** - Ukraine has faced its toughest week so far this year on the eastern front.

Kyiv's troops lost more ground to Russian forces but committed enormous resources to holding Bakhmut, a coal-mining town that has acquired emblematic importance to both sides.

**Russian convicts say defense ministry is sending them from jail to fight as 'cannon fodder' in Ukraine** -

"I am being taken to be shot. I lost a lot of people there. Remember this: do not send more people here. It's enough, they want to kill us all."

It is the last message Viktor Sevalnev would send. A convict, who had been in jail for armed robbery and assault, he was sent from prison to fight for Russia in Ukraine. After most of his colleagues died in an assault on a factory outside Soledar, it was the act of survival that proved fatal to Sevalnev.

In a last message to his wife, he said he feared officials from the Russian Ministry of Defense would soon take him from his hospital bed, where he recorded the audio message, and execute him. Days later, his body was returned to his wife in Moscow, in a closed coffin.

Sevalnev's callous fate joins a growing list of complaints of abuse from convicts whom CNN has spoken to. For months, Russia has been using the shadowy private mercenary company Wagner to bolster its frontline presence with prisoners – a scheme at first denied and secretive, but then openly promoted by Wagner's owner, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

On Thursday, Prigozhin announced that Wagner had stopped recruiting convicts to fight in Ukraine, saying: "We have completely discontinued the recruitment of prisoners into Wagner PMC. To those who work for us currently, all obligations are being fulfilled." No reason was given for the decision and CNN cannot independently confirm the claims.

However, Sevalnev and several prisoners CNN has spoken to seem to indicate a disturbing new strategy. They say they were directly employed by the Russian Ministry of Defense.

A Ukrainian intelligence official confirmed to CNN that prisoners recently captured by Ukrainian forces had said they were directly employed by the ministry.

"They emphasize to us that they are not Wagner, that they were invited officially by the defense ministry," Andriy Usov, representative for defense intelligence, at the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, told CNN.

He said the development had "echoes of internal squabbling among the Russian military leadership," and that the Russian defense hierarchy, defense minister Sergei Shoigu and the new head of the Ukraine operation, Valery Gerasimov, were creating a convict resource they could directly control through the ministry's own private companies. Usov said the ministry had fewer convicts for now but they "will be used in the same way ... as cannon fodder," as Wagner does.

Vladimir Osechkin, from prisoner rights group Gulagu.net, said the Ministry of Defense appeared to be luring recruits and convicts from Wagner using "more favorable terms" as a check on the rising clout of its owner, Prigozhin, increasingly seen as a competitor to parts of the armed forces.

**Russian Ministry of Defence is forcing prisoners and immigrants to fight in Ukraine** - Russia's Wagner mercenary group has reportedly recruited tens of thousands of prisoners to fight in Ukraine. But the growing number of casualties and extrajudicial executions make it much harder to find volunteers, even in prisons.

Many convicts are now worried that they can be simply forced to go to war - and migrant workers from Central Asian countries find themselves particularly vulnerable.

Anuar came to Russia in search of work in 2018. He was imprisoned for drug trafficking and sent to serve his term at Penal Colony Number Six in Vladimir region. The BBC is not disclosing his real name and citizenship for safety reasons.

At the end of January, he told his father that a group of Central Asians had been sent to fight in Ukraine without their consent. "There are lots of Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz there in that prison. Now they are planning to send another group and my son is worried that they will force him to go too," Anuar's father told the BBC.

The BBC has seen court documents and Anuar's letters which confirm he is indeed serving his sentence in that prison. And his story about the group that was forced to go to Ukraine in January is also corroborated by Olga Romanova, director of the civil rights organisation Russia Behind Bars. Parents of those prisoners approached her for help.

"They were not given a choice. They were told to sign the contract and were sent to the front line like a bag of potatoes," Ms Romanova said.

Initially, the parents were willing to go to court so that their children wouldn't end up in Ukraine, she says. But then they refused to, out of fear of the punishment their children could face if they stayed in prison.

Penal Colony Number Six is notorious for its ill-treatment and frequent beatings of convicts. Olga Romanova described it as "a torture prison". It's where Alexei Navalny, the prominent Russian opposition figure, is being held.

Russian authorities openly sign up people to join the armed forces at the migration centre in Moscow. There are even ads in Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik languages offering citizens of these countries a fast track to obtain a Russian passport if they join the armed forces.

But activists say that it's not always voluntary.

Migrant rights defender Valentina Chupik told the BBC that police officers sometimes stopped Central Asian migrants on the street and intimidated them into signing a military contract. They were told that otherwise they would get deported, Ms Chupik said.

Many labour migrants lack proper work permits, live at a place other than where they're registered, or violate other migration rules. And that's why they can be an easy target for recruiters.

## Containment

**Norway to donate \$7.4bn in aid to Ukraine** - Norway's parliament has signed off on aid totaling 75 billion kroner (\$7.4bn) to Kyiv as part of a five-year support package, making the Nordic nation one of the world's biggest donors to war-torn Ukraine.

The money will be split evenly between military and humanitarian assistance over five years, broken down to 15 billion kroner (\$1.5bn) annually.

**How much aid have NATO members sent to Ukraine?** - According to the latest data from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, a German think tank, NATO members committed at least 75.2 billion euros (\$80.5bn) in financial, humanitarian and military aid between January 24 and November 20, 2022.

At 47.8 billion euros (\$51.2bn) in commitments, the US is Ukraine's biggest contributor, with at least 22.9 billion euros (\$24.5bn) going towards military pledges, 15.05 billion euros (\$16.1bn) in financial aid and 9.9 billion euros (\$10.6bn) in humanitarian assistance.

Military assistance includes weapons, equipment and financial aid for the Ukrainian military. Humanitarian relief covers medical, food and other items for civilians, while financial assistance comes in the form of grants, loans and guarantees.

The UK is the second-highest NATO member contributor with 7.1 billion euros (\$7.6bn) pledged to Ukraine, while Germany is third at 5.4 billion euros (\$5.8bn).

Non-members Sweden and Finland have committed at least 810 million euros (\$867m) and 310 million euros (\$332m), respectively.

Since November 20, the US and other countries have pledged additional military packages to Ukraine. The chart below provides a detailed breakdown of how much each NATO member country has committed to Ukraine.

**Russia's tanks may face 'disadvantageous conditions' in a battle with US-made Abrams tanks, Russian expert says** - The US has pledged to send 31 Abrams tanks to Ukraine in the coming months.

Abrams' are better than Russian tanks, and Russia isn't making enough anti-tank weapons to beat them, a top Russian defense expert says.

But 31 Abrams likely aren't enough to affect the situation on the battlefield, the expert says.

Russia's tanks are inferior to the M1 Abrams that the US is sending to Ukraine, according to a top Russian defense expert. In addition, Russia is short of modern anti-tank missiles and armor-piercing shells for tank cannons that are needed to defeat the Abrams and other Western tanks.



"Even in export versions, the Abrams M1A2 SEP v.2 variant significantly outperforms any Russian production tank," Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a Russian think tank, told the Russian newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets.

"Now Russian tanks use old Soviet shells in their ammunition," Pukhov said, according to a translation of the article. "Their capabilities are sufficient to defeat tanks such as the T-64, T-72, and T-80 at relatively short distances during tank battles. But the emergence of Western tanks with powerful guns, modern armor-piercing shells and fire control systems can lead to a sharp increase in the distances during tank battles.

"In such a duel, we may find ourselves in unfavorable conditions," Pukhov added.

Pukhov also warned that Russia lacks modern third-generation anti-tank missiles similar to the US-made Javelins that Ukrainian troops used to devastate Russian armor. Russia does have powerful Kornet laser-guided missiles that proved effective against Israeli Merkava tanks during the 2006 Lebanon War.

However, Russia only has a few Kornets. The bulk of its anti-tank missile arsenal is composed of Fagot and Konkur models that were first deployed in 1970.

On the other hand, Pukhov is careful to note that the M1A2 SEP v2 is superior to Russian tanks in production — which doesn't include the next-generation T-14 Armata.

Despite the scare that the Armata caused a few years ago, when Western experts feared that it outmatched NATO tanks, the vehicle has not appeared in Ukraine. This has led to speculation that the Armata is so flawed that Russian commanders are afraid to commit it to battle.

## Comments, Developments and Reports

**Switzerland moves to seize \$140m linked to former Ukrainian leader** - Switzerland has launched proceedings to confiscate more than 130 million Swiss francs (\$140m) linked to the entourage of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

The Swiss government said it had initiated proceedings with the Federal Administrative Court to seize money presumed to be of "illicit origin".

The people involved were linked to Yanukovich, who fled to Russia after being deposed in 2014 by mass protests. Yanukovich's Swiss-based assets were frozen the same year.

**Comment** – So where does the ex-President of a "poor" country manage to sequester this amount of money away?

**A Russian government commission has approved the sale of Swedish furniture maker IKEA's three factories** in Russia to two local buyers, paving the way for a deal to be struck, a government official was quoted as saying on today.

## Putin & Russia

**A year into the Ukraine war, Russians quietly call for peace** - Despite strict government censorship and the threat of jail, residents of Russia's capital are finding subtle ways to express alarm and dissent about the Kremlin's year-long offensive in Ukraine.

The messages are barely visible but are omnipresent throughout Moscow – scrawled on signposts, graffitied on walls, or pasted as stickers on drain pipes.

“Write. Speak. Don’t be silent about the war!” is the plea of one Muscovite who carved the words into a wooden bench partially covered in snow in the centre of the capital.

**Another senior Russian dies - fell out of a window – report** - A high-ranking Russian defense official in the war against Ukraine was found dead Wednesday after falling from a high-rise window in an apartment building.

Marina Yankina, 58, was discovered by a passerby at the entrance of a high-rise on Zamshina Street in St. Petersburg, Russian news Telegram channel Mash reported.

She is believed to have fallen 160 feet to her death. Her personal belongings and documents were found on a balcony in the building.

According to a preliminary investigation, it is believed Yankina committed suicide.

Yankina was a key figure in the funding of Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine.

She was head of the financial support department of the Ministry of Defense for the Western Military District, which is closely involved in the invasion.



**Russia's Northern Fleet deploys with nukes in first since Cold War** - "A central part of the nuclear capabilities is located on the North Fleet's submarines and surface vessels," the report stated, adding that these tactical nuclear weapons represent a very significant threat to NATO member states.

This comes amid Russia's defense budget increasing by 34% in 2023.

In addition, the intelligence report notes that Russia's conventional military power has weakened.

This is largely due to the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. This conflict has seen Russia expend large amounts of its stockpile of missiles, artillery, combat vehicles, manpower and more.

**'Russia finds itself dependent on China'** - In the 1950s, at the beginning of the Cold War, Mao's China obeyed its Soviet big brother. On the side of the "reds", the USSR had oversight over China. Stalin had the upper hand. Today, the situation is reversed. After a year of the war it launched against Ukraine, Russia finds itself dependent on China. Within the "unlimited friendship" relationship that Moscow and Beijing claim to have established, Xi Jinping is the dominant party – more so every day.

Moscow's aggression against Kyiv put Beijing in a complicated position. Vladimir Putin launched his "special operation" barely three weeks after having sealed the "friendship" pact between their two countries in Beijing on February 4, 2022. The goal was to take control of a Ukraine that had succumbed far too much to Western influence, in the eyes the Kremlin's master.

**Russian armed forces faces severe demographic challenges** - In December 2022, the Russian MoD announced its ambitious plan for increasing the size of the Russian Armed Forces to 1.5 million personnel by the end of 2026. To this, the number of contracted soldiers within the Russian Armed Forces has to be increased significantly as well: to 521,000 by the end of 2023 and 695,000 by the end of 2026, adjusted from the previous plan of increasing this number from 405,000 in 2020 to 500,000 by 2027. Besides this, the conscription system will also be adjusted, with the age range for conscription being changed from 18–27 years old (at the moment, Russian men are not conscripted once they reach age 27) to 21–30 years old (Rg.ru, March 25, 2020; Mil.ru, December 21, 2022).

Recently, this author estimated that the only hypothetical way for realizing the planned increase would be a massive campaign of coercion for military service in Russia: from forcing young drafted soldiers to sign two-year service

contracts to extending the network of military training centers within the universities, among other strategies. However, a more serious issue looks to restrain the planned increase in the Russian Armed Forces faces—namely, Russia’s mounting demographic challenges (see EDM, January 10).

According to the Russian population census of 2020–2021, the number of men 18–26 years old in Russia was around 7.21 million in 2021. Using this census data, the number of men 18–26 years old will decrease to 7.18 million in 2023 and should then slightly increase to 7.22 million in 2026. Moreover, those who will be between the ages of 18 and 26 in 2023 are the same people who will be 21–29 years old in 2026, when the new conscription rules should be functioning (Rosstat.gov.ru, accessed February 16).

Yet, in fact, these projected numbers should be lower as annual mortality rates count 1,700–1,900 for the those 10–14 years old; 4,000–4,200 for those 15–19 years old; and 6,500–8,000 for those 20–24 years old (Rosstat.gov.ru, June 21, 2022).

For comparison, according to the 2010 census, about 10.6 million men ages 18 to 26 resided in Russia and about 12 million men of the same age group, according to the 2022 population census. Considering the planned increase of the conscription age, less than 7.16 million men ages 21 to 29 will be present in Russia in 2030 (Rosstat.gov.ru, accessed February 16).

The number of young men in Russia is inevitably decreasing. In previous decades, Russian military leadership tried to take into consideration the long-term consequences of this process. For instance, the seasonal conscription in 2002 counted around 160,000–170,000 soldiers, and the spring conscription six years later numbered 133,000 soldiers. At that time, the term for conscripted military service was two years.

However, in 2008, when the term for military service was reduced from two years to one, the MoD tried to increase the number of drafted soldiers. In this way, the 2008 fall conscription enlisted 219,000 soldiers, the 2009 spring conscription numbered 305,000 soldiers and, during the further seasonal conscription campaigns of 2009 and 2010, around 270,000–280,000 soldiers were drafted (RIA Novosti, October 2, 2008; RBC, April 1, 2009; RIA Novosti, July 16, 2010). Thus, as the demographic of young Russians within the country began to dwindle, the total number of conscripted soldiers decreased from 640,000–660,000 to 540,000–560,000 during the 2000s.

Then, from 2012 to 2022, the number of soldiers drafted during each conscription campaign decreased from 200,000 in the spring of 2011 to an average of 130,000–140,000 (RBC, April 1, 2011; Rg.ru, December 31, 2021). Meanwhile, the number of contracted soldiers (including sergeants and noncommissioned officers) increased from 150,000 in 2010 to 405,000 in 2020 (Interfax, June 9, 2010; Rg.ru, March 25, 2020)—though, during these years, the number of conscripted soldiers and the number of contracted soldiers represented overlapping sets. That means the total number of soldiers, both drafted and contracted, decreased from almost 700,000 in 2010 to between 560,000 and 600,000 at the beginning of the 2020s.

In addition, it must be mentioned here that the total labor pool in Russia, made up of those people who should feed into the armed forces, also decreased from 93.1 million in 2010 to 89.1 million in 2020. And the number of those employed decreased from 71.5 million in 2010 to 69.5 million in 2020 (Rosstat.gov.ru, accessed February 16).

Consequently, the planned increase for personnel in the Russian Armed Forces seems to be impossible within the current demographic, economic and even political circumstances. The threshold of 695,000 contracted soldiers by 2027 means that one in ten Russian men between the ages of 21 and 30 could be called up to active service at any moment. In truth, this increase would only be possible if Russia was a truly democratic federation facing an existential foreign threat. Another option would be if Russia drafted young women together with men and those women signed formal service contracts—though, given the domestic demographic problems, this option looks even more impossible in Russia. As a result, the Russian Ministry of Defense may believe that it can close the gap by recruiting young migrants

from Central Asia in exchange for Russian citizenship, which adds another dimension to Russia's growing desperation in the face of declining demographics at home and manpower shortages in Ukraine.

## Diplomacy

**Israel 'committed to sovereignty' of Ukraine: Foreign minister** - Israel's foreign minister has said his country is "committed to the sovereignty" of Ukraine during the first visit by an Israeli minister to the war-torn nation since Russia launched its invasion.

"Israel stands firmly in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and remains committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," Eli Cohen said during a news conference in Kyiv with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba.

While Israel has condemned Russia's invasion, it has limited its assistance to Kyiv to humanitarian aid and protective gear to date.

**From the front line of war in Ukraine, Poland sees a changing EU** - After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Poland is now on the front line.

Polish leaders were not taken seriously about a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine, though they were concerned long before the first air raid sirens rang out in Kyiv in 2022. Ever since, Poland has played a leadership role, pushing the European Union for more aid to Ukraine and hosting both foreign militaries and millions of refugees as a front-line country. But Poland has its own longstanding conflict with the EU, and it has been pushed to the back burner. How has the war in Ukraine changed Poland, and how has Poland changed the EU?

## NATO

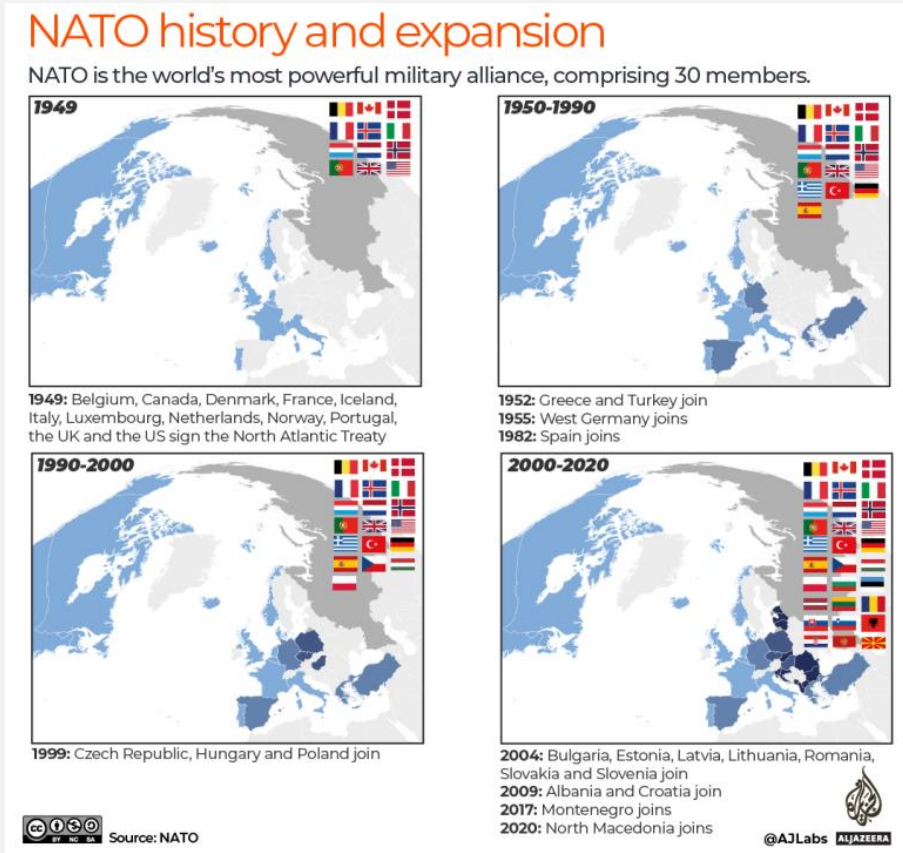
**Sweden and Finland's bid to join NATO** - On May 16, 2022, Sweden officially applied to join NATO. Two days later, Finland followed suit.

On July 5, NATO ambassadors signed the accession protocols to allow Sweden and Finland to join the alliance.

Between July and September, 28 NATO members except for Hungary and Turkey approved Sweden and Finland's accession. NATO requires unanimous approval from all of its existing members to admit new members.

Turkey has demanded that the Nordic countries stop supporting Kurdish armed groups, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and lift their bans on the sales of some arms to Turkey.

In January, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan indicated that Ankara



may agree to Finland joining NATO, but not Sweden, in the face of rising tensions with Stockholm.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has close relations with Putin, has promised that his parliament would approve the two bids next month.

Finland shares a 1,300km (810-mile) border with Russia. While Sweden does not have a land border with Russia, it does share a maritime border with the country in the Baltic Sea.

Russia has firmly opposed Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO, seeing it as further encroachment of the transatlantic alliance towards Russia’s borders.

## NATO

# Military budget 2023

NATO’s military budget for 2023 is 1.96 billion euros (\$2.1bn).

30 NATO members’ pledges:

€ = euros

<b>US</b> 16.3% €319m	<b>France</b> 10.5% €205.8m	<b>Italy</b> 8.8% €172m	<b>Canada</b> 6.9% €135m		
<b>Germany</b> 16.3% €319m	<b>Spain</b> 6% €117.6m	<b>Poland</b> 3% €58.8m	<b>Belgium</b> 2.1% €41m	<b>Norway</b> 1.8% €35m	
<b>UK</b> 11.3% €221m	<b>Turkey</b> 4.7% €92m	<b>Denmark</b> 1.3% €25m	<b>Czech Republic</b> 1.1%	<b>Portugal</b> 1%	<b>Hungary</b> 0.6%
	<b>Netherlands</b> 3.5% €68.6m	<b>Romania</b> 1.2% €23.5m	<b>Slovakia</b> 0.5%		
		<b>Greece</b> 1.1%	<b>Bulgaria</b> 0.4%		



Source: NATO | February 14, 2022



@AJLabs ALJAZEERA