

Conflict Update # 312

January 1st, 2023

Back issues at www.accgroupco.com

Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 106,720 (760) soldiers killed, 3,031 (+2) enemy tanks, 6,084 (+9) armored combat vehicles, 2,021 (+5) artillery systems, 423 (+0) MLRS systems, 213 (+0) air defense systems, 283 (+0) warplanes, 269 (+0) helicopters, 1,792 (+46) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 723 (+12) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,720 (+13) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 181 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Source: Institute for the Study of War (21:00 GMT, 28 December)



More explosions reported inside Russia – Yet more “unexplained” explosions have been reported far behind front lines and distant in Russia.

Viewing the map alongside, one can see how far behind Russian front lines two recent attacks against Russian airfields have occurred.

Engels airbase is located close to Saratov in the south east and is 600-odd kilometers from the Ukrainian border.

Two airbases in Crimea were also struck over the past two days, together with a number of ammunition sites and command posts.

This has led to a traffic jam across the Kerch Bridge linking eastern Crimea to the Russian mainland.

Panic and trigger-happy defense crews in Russia continue to shoot at anything coming across their radars with multiple cruise missiles and drones being destined for Ukrainian targets being destroyed by friendly fire from inside Crimea.

The Kremlin has now blamed Ukraine for the attacks against the airfields in the map above, a significant change in reporting with Russia usually attributing (embarrassing) strikes to internal causes or fires and the like. Blaming Ukraine concedes Kyiv’s ability to reach into well-protected nuclear facilities.

It has also forced the Kremlin to transfer defense batteries to protect these and other facilities, meaning less firepower with which to attack Ukraine.

Explosions rock Ukraine’s Kyiv in early hours of New Year’s Day – Numerous explosions have rocked the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, minutes after midnight on New Year’s Day.

The attacks on Kyiv on Sunday followed a barrage of at least 20 cruise missiles fired at targets across Ukraine in what officials there called “Terror on New Year’s Eve”.

A hotel just south of Kyiv’s city centre was hit, and a residential building in another district was damaged, according to the city administration.

Other regions across Ukraine also came under fire, including the southern region of Mykolaiv, the western city of Khmelnytskyi and the southern industrial powerhouse city of Zaporizhzhia.

Russian change in terror tactics – Now that Ukraine is increasingly locating anti-missile batteries around crucial infrastructural positions, Russia has changed to targeting innocent civilian suburbs.

This terrorist regime knows no bounds as they pick on the most vulnerable targets where they will not encounter resistance. The true characteristics of a terrorist and thug.

Russia 'quickly running out' of weapons Putin needs in Ukraine: General – Former U.S. general said that Moscow and Putin are "quickly running out" of weapons in the ongoing invasion of Ukraine.



Mark Hertling is a retired U.S. Army lieutenant general who previously served as the commanding general of the Army's Europe branch. Since his retirement a decade ago, Hertling has become prolific as an analyst, appearing on various news programs to discuss military matters, becoming particularly outspoken in the last year amid Russia's invasion of its Eastern European neighbor.

On Friday, Hertling appeared on CNN where host Abby Phillip asked him about Russia's recent attempts to "shore up" partnerships with potential ally nations. The retired general said that Putin is likely quite keen to build up relations with the likes of Iran and China due to his army's dwindling supply of weapons and munitions in Ukraine.

"The truth of the matter is [that] Russia is attempting to gain partners with different countries, who have different types of ammunition that they can help supply this war," Hertling said. "And I think Putin is realizing that he's quickly running out of the kinds of munitions he needs to continue this fight."

"Certainly, Putin is attempting to shore up his partnership with President Xi. But I think Xi a long time ago realized this mission is making Russia and Putin a pariah on the world stage," Hertling said. "They have promised cooperation, political cooperation in the official statement. But as you saw, Putin was pressing it a little bit, saying, hey, we want military cooperation."

How Ukraine encroached and recaptured Kherson in maps – Our Updates regularly tracked and analyzed Ukrainian advances in Kherson Oblast over the weeks leading to recapture of the western bank.

It was estimated that some 20,000-odd Russian soldiers were in danger of being trapped by Ukrainian pincer movements seeing rapid disintegration of Kremlin front lines.

Russian command then issued an evacuation order for all civilians to leave Kherson, in our opinion nothing more than a smoke-screen for their soldiers to mingle in with civilians whilst dressed in mufti. This is how they managed to extricate the majority of their Kherson brigade – but left behind huge quantities of armored and heavy equipment, together with ammunition and supplies.

Ukraine has reportedly more than tripled its weapons count – tanks, anti-aircraft batteries and a variety of other equipment – since the two counteroperations commenced in early September – Kharkiv and then Kherson.

As reported earlier last week, Ukrainian military engineers are converting captured equipment to carry NATO-caliber barrels and ammunition, once they have exhausted their own and captured Soviet-era stocks.

This projects very well for Ukraine as they are re-kitting with modern NATO weapons and equipment far more advanced than Russian ordnance and inventories. Converting to western-type munitions simultaneously opens further



avenues of supply whereas previously Ukrainian weaponry was primarily Soviet styled calibration and maintenance dependent.

Russian casualties in Ukraine - Together with BBC Russian, Mediazona has been keeping track of Russian casualties since the early days of the war in Ukraine. In April, it published one of the first data investigations tackling this topic.

Here's what Mediazona has managed to uncover so far:

- The majority of Russian soldiers killed come from poorer regions, such as Dagestan, Buryatia, Yekaterinburg region, and Bashkiria.
- 110 military pilots are known to have been killed. The loss of pilots is particularly painful for the army: it takes 7–8 years to train one first-class frontline pilot, and costs about \$3.4 million.
- Volunteer units have been sustaining the heaviest casualties since the summer. In comparison, in the first weeks of the war, the airborne forces suffered heaviest losses, and the motorised rifle forces followed suit.
- By 16 December, Mediazona had been able to confirm the deaths of over 1,500 officers. **176 of them had the rank of a Lieutenant Colonel or higher.**
- In the regular military units, the 21–23-year-old bracket saw the highest number of deaths. Volunteer and mobilised fighters are considerably older. Generally, men who go to war as volunteers are aged 30–35 and older, and the majority of mobilised soldiers are older than 25.

Operation Army Macho - Russia's top military brass and Putin are trying to craft an image of tough cookies and show they are 'in the same boat' with the soldiers. The results are not great.

Almost immediately after Ukraine's Zelenskyy arrived at the frontlines and handed out military awards to distinguished Ukrainian fighters in Bakhmut, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Putin had also travelled to the "special military operation" zone. It was earlier reported that the president personally gave instructions to high-ranking generals in the Russian group headquarters.

However, thorough and meticulous researcher quickly discovered video footage shown by the Kremlin was made in the Southern Military District headquarters: "The large round table from the Southern Military District headquarters and the interior of the room where it stands are identical to the one seen during Putin's inspection of the troop headquarters. Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu visited the same headquarters in November. It was also claimed that the minister travelled to the "special military operation zone". (**Comment** – we reported on this false report some time ago and noted that there was green grass outside the window where General Shoigu was supposedly visiting troops under fire – in the middle of winter!).

According to the Defence Ministry, the Southern Military District headquarters is situated in Rostov-on-Don which means it is located about 200 km away from the frontline. So, the enemy is either soon going to be at Russia's doorstep or the authorities decided to launch a massive PR campaign: "See, our leader also visited the frontline!" Add to this Shoigu's helicopter flights over the Crimea defence line and it becomes clear that the Russian authorities are clearly trying to improve their image that has suffered lately and show the world that they are the real deal.

However, various Ukrainian officials daily go on air and sit down for interviews to tell people about the situation on the frontline and in the country. In contrast, Russia's top brass rarely go public.

There has barely been any dialogue with citizens of the warring country for many months now apart from tiresome reports about eliminating hordes of enemies and capturing the same villages for the fifth time.

If commanders have to give rare interviews, they use teleprompters and still struggle. The defence minister himself flies over the green grass fields of Crimea in the middle of winter.

“Shoigu has always put a lot of effort into PR,” a Russian army officer who asked to remain anonymous told Novaya Gazeta Europe. “Remember the time when he used to be the emergencies minister? The whole country was on fire every year, man-made disasters were occurring, firefighters were taking bribes, while Sergey Shoigu continued to present himself as the saviour of the Fatherland.”

“He often landed second in approval ratings after Putin. His only task was to keep a reasonable distance from his boss’s rating. Meanwhile, who now remembers the name of the current emergencies minister? After his promotion to defence minister, Shoigu kept constructing his image with openly public tricks: parades, tank biathlon, and reports about the most advanced weapons that were developed back in the Soviet times. He chose to go fishing and hunting with Putin, went camping, and enjoyed the image of the country’s second hottest macho instead of creating a professional army.

At the very start of Russia’s invasion into Ukraine, Putin was making a point to remove himself from military command. But as time went on, he increasingly started associating himself with hostilities. He started holding regular Security Council meetings and even personally visited military headquarters to give out orders recently.

“It is important for Putin to stress his closeness with the nation, especially when it comes to the special military operation,” Carnegie Centre expert and political scientist Andrey Kolesnikov tells Novaya-Europe.

“Putin remodelled his whole world outlook and is now trying to impose this change on everything around him. According to him, the whole world now needs to adapt to these alterations,” political scientist Dmitry Oreshkin told Novaya-Europe. “He launched this war as a special military operation. At the same time, the president was above the fighting: special forces headed by specifically trained generals were supposed to act. Meanwhile, Putin continued his day-to-day presidential business seemingly not engaging in combat. All losses were automatically blamed on generals and armed forces.”

Oreshkin describes Putin as a very stubborn person and says that it took the Russian president almost ten months to change the paradigm that formed in his head.

However, even Putin realised this world outlook needs to be updated: what is happening now is not a special military operation but an actual war. And there is no business right now more important for the country. And so, his suit needs to be mentally changed for the commander-in-chief’s uniform, a knight in shining armour of sorts.

From now on, Putin will show everyone that he is inseparable from the army and is fully in charge of the war actions. This performance is meant equally for the ordinary people and the military. Look at Putin personally giving out special military operation orders, and when he headed to Belarus to reach agreements with Alexander Lukashenko.

“I think that this is a very risky strategy,” Oreshkin continues. “Because people will not associate Putin not with the victories that are yet to be achieved but with the defeats that have already been suffered and the ones that will potentially come in the future. Putin now can only win. Because he has become a direct participant and even a key figure in what’s happening. His image is directly dependent on how battlefield fighting turns out.”

Russia's war in Ukraine shows why troops need to learn to put their phones away, top US Marine general says - Russia's war in Ukraine has vividly demonstrated the consequences of communications failures. For US military leaders, the war underscores the need to manage their forces' electronic signatures. To do that, younger troops will have to unlearn some habits, the Marine Corps' top general says.

The use of new technology on the battlefield has prompted the US military to rethink its operations as it prepares for a future conflict with a technologically advanced adversary, and many of its changes have been validated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, US Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger said this month.

One of the most important lessons is that your electronics are giving away more information about you than you think, said Berger, who has led an effort to develop capabilities to operate in a more dispersed manner since taking over as the Corps' top officer in July 2019.

The risk posed by electronic emissions is salient for Marines, as those emissions could allow rivals to track them, listen to their communications, or attack them.

"We have to be distributed. You have to have enough mobility that you can relocate your unit pretty often. You have to learn all about — like some of us learned 30 years ago — camouflage, decoys, deception," Berger said at a Defense Writers Group event on December 8. "What we didn't worry so much about 30 years ago now is every time you press a button, you're emitting."

For young soldiers, sailors, and Marines, cell phones and other devices are part of everyday life, and managing those devices' emissions will require unlearning some habits, Berger said.

"They don't think anything about pressing a button. This is what they do all day long. Now we have to completely undo 18 years of communicating all day long and tell them that's bad. That will get you killed, so turn your cell phone off," Berger said at the event. "They're like, 'I won't touch it. It just stays on.' No, there's parts of the cell phone you don't understand."

Comment – We have previously reported on Ukrainian intelligence interception and tracing of electronic communications across Russian brigades and fronts. These are translated into electronic addresses and communicated back to Ukrainian and US command posts, from where satellite analyses compare and lock in the origin, which coordinates are then relayed back to smart artillery batteries and fire is concentrated on the electronic address source – all within minutes.

The continued use of cell phones by Russian troops and officers is due to the absence of modern communications equipment in Russian lines, coupled with the rushing of ill-trained and equipped forces to front line positions. They have no communications aside from their personal cell phones – so they use them, primarily to call home and complain about poor conditions and lack of training and food.

As the British Bobby would always “Alo, Alo, Alo, What have we here then?”

Putin should be shocked: Ukraine keeps killing Russia's best tanks - Ukrainian Forces Keep Taking Out Russian Tanks in Donetsk and Luhansk: Video footage shared on Telegram, and Twitter shows how Ukrainian forces continue to use Western-supplied weapons to take out Russian tanks, worsening Moscow's severe shortage of modern armored vehicles.

In one video, the Ukrainian “Kraken” special unit is seen severely damaging a Russian tank and destroying a BTR-80 armored personnel carrier in Novoselivske, Luhansk.

“The Ukrainian special unit "Kraken" damaged a Russian T-90M tank and destroyed a BTR-80 armored personnel carrier and BMP infantry fighting vehicle in Novoselivske, #Luhansk Oblast,” popular Twitter war-tracking account Ukraine Weapons Tracker wrote on December 30.

Similar video footage emerged in December showing two Russian T-64BV tanks being destroyed by the Ukrainian 59th Motorized Brigade. The video footage, recorded from rotary-blade unmanned aerial vehicles, shows the tanks exploding dramatically as they are hit by Ukrainian ammunition.

After the initial explosions, the tanks continue to smolder, suggesting that the ammunition within the vehicles may have also ignited upon impact.

Ukraine destroyed 58 Russian cruise missiles in one day - Incredible video footage shared on social media this week shows a Ukrainian soldier taking out an incoming Russian cruise missile using a shoulder-launched weapon.

The video, filmed from a cell phone, shows a Russian cruise missile hurtling through the air and a lone Ukrainian soldier operating a man-portable air-defense system (MANPADS) and firing it at the missile.

As the Russian missile disappears into the distance, the Ukrainian soldier launches a rocket at the missile and intercepts it in the air. The Russian missile explodes in the air as several soldiers can be heard celebrating off-camera.

US helped Ukraine target Russian generals, sink Moskva - American intelligence agencies gave highly sensitive data to the Ukrainian armed forces that allowed them to track and kill a dozen Russian generals and sink the Russian flagship Moskva, a new book reveals — despite strident administration denials.

A “furious” President Biden gave “presidential tongue-lashings” to CIA chief Bill Burns and other top aides in May after leakers told NBC News and the New York Times that Ukrainians had been given real-time intelligence from US sources.

“He didn’t like what he considered to be publicly taunting the Russians,” White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain told author Chris Whipple in the forthcoming book “The Fight of His Life,” out Jan. 17.

The reports of secret streams of real-time battlefield intelligence drew a furious response from the Kremlin — and instant repudiation from the Pentagon, the National Security Council, and Biden’s press office.

“We do not provide intelligence with the intent to kill Russian generals,” NSC spokesperson Adrienne Wilson said.

“We did not provide Ukraine with specific targeting information for the Moskva,” insisted Jen Psaki, then the White House’s press secretary. “We were not involved in the Ukrainians’ decision to strike the ship or in the operation they carried out.”

A new book coming reportedly relates how the two nations collaborated in these operations.

Ukrainian forces launching Bakhmut counters as Russian progress slows - The bloody battle for Bakhmut is still ongoing even though progress by Russian forces is slowing, according to the ISW.

The U.S.-based think tank said Russian troops have continued their offensive operations in the Avdiivka area, around 60 miles south of Bakhmut, which is located in the Donetsk oblast in Eastern Ukraine, "where the pace of Russian offensive operations may have slowed compared to previous days."

The ISW's daily update also added that the Ukrainian General Staff has said there were more settlements around the city that have become targets of Russian attacks. "This inflection may indicate that the pace of Russian attacks around Bakhmut is slowing," the ISW wrote.



This development may back the ISW's prior forecast that the Russian offensive there "may be culminating," meaning that an attacking military force can no longer continue its advance.

Above is a Ukrainian armored troop carrier pictured on the outskirts of Bakhmut yesterday. Notice the under-inflated tires – essential when driving in soft terrain such as mud and beach sand. I used to drive extensively in the African back bush - over 100,000 kilometers – including during heavy rainy seasons and we always let pressure out of our tires so as to gain traction.

Humanitarian

Eight Pskov paratroopers in Bucha

Even before the New York Times investigation into the Russian paratrooper unit that killed dozens of people in Ukraine's Bucha, an IStories article published by Novaya Gazeta Europe found eight soldiers from Russia's Pskov who may have been behind the shooting of civilians in this Ukrainian town.

Here's what IStories managed to uncover:

- IStories reports that after the shooting of eight civilians that took place in Bucha on 4 March, Russian soldiers called their families using the phone of Ivan Skiba, the only survivor of the mass shooting.
- Skiba's phone was left behind at a house in Bucha by Russian troops, who were forced to withdraw from the region in late March. The man managed to get his phone back and later agreed to give an interview to IStories and share his call log with reporters.
- The investigators studied three dozen outgoing calls from Skiba's phone, which were traced to eight servicemen from the 104th and 234th Airborne Assault Regiments, based in Russia's Pskov.
- Among the servicemen is Alexey Vishnevsky, 26, who called his wife, a nail tech from Pskov, using the Bucha man's phone. He serves in the 234th Airborne Assault Regiment. His wife told IStories that Alexey sometimes gets in touch, but has not been back home yet.
- Another soldier to use the phone was Alexander Popov, 20, who called his mother on 4 March. He served in Pskov as a contractor. He was killed on 19 May near Donetsk.

Putin

How Putin decided to go to war – A number of independent reports and articles have been published by Novaya Gazeta Europe, including this one by author Roman Anin.

In making the decision to invade Ukraine, Putin, who has become more and more isolated in recent years, relied mostly on the reports of the special services, namely the so-called Fifth Service of the FSB.

The Fifth Service, led by General Sergey Beseda, is tasked with gathering intelligence within Russia and the former Soviet states. Ukraine is among its areas of expertise. A former FSB officer told IStories that his former colleagues were essentially "air sellers." "They were making things up, misinterpreting, and sometimes fantasizing, and the leadership was happy to believe it," another source said.

The FSB's informants on the situation in Ukraine were mainly fugitive officials from ousted president Viktor Yanukovich's team, who fed inaccurate information to Beseda, failing to understand the climate in post-2014 Ukraine. The general carried this intel to the very top.

Nevertheless, Putin was supposed to receive information from various sources, but in practice that didn't work. Officers tended to correct contradictory intel to fit "the way the boss thinks." sources told IStories. This ultimately led to confirmation bias, negative personnel selection, and Putin believing what he wanted to believe.

All Russian army units capable of carrying out offensives took part in the "special military operation" in Ukraine: 11 combined arms and one tank army, all the offensive forces of the Airborne Forces, all the existing reconnaissance units, the marines of all four fleets, self-propelled artillery, bomber, attack and fighter aviation.

People from the poorest regions of Russia are taking part in the war, which suggests an explanation of the large-scale looting in occupied territories. What is more, every third top commander of the Russian army advancing into Ukraine was found to have debts, including housing and utilities bills and alimony payments.

One in eight officers identified are affiliated with Ukraine, including Colonel Vadim Pankov, who was born in Belarus but later went to Ukraine and became a commander of a Ukrainian army unit in 1992. However, he ended up breaking his military oath to Ukraine and became commander of the 45th separate Special Forces Brigade of the Russian Army.

Zelensky tells Russians - Putin is destroying you - President Zelensky told Russians Putin is destroying their country.

Speaking after Putin delivered a New Year address flanked by people in military uniform, Zelensky said the Russian president was hiding behind his troops, not leading them.

Saturday saw a day of deadly strikes across Ukraine, and Zelensky said Ukrainians would not forgive Russia.

At least one person died and dozens were injured in the attacks.

The head of Ukraine's armed forces, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, said air defences had shot down 12 of 20 Russian cruise missiles on Saturday.

There were further missile strikes on Kyiv just hours into the New Year on Sunday, officials said. The Ukrainian Air force said it had shot down 45 Iranian-made kamikaze drones overnight.

As explosions rocked the capital, some residents sang the national anthem, while officials accused Russia of deliberately targeting civilians while they gathered to celebrate the New Year.

Andriy Nebitov, the head of the Kyiv police, posted an image to social media of a downed drone with the words "**Happy New Year**" scribbled across it in Russian.

"That is everything you need to know about the terror state and its army," he wrote on Facebook, adding that the remains had crashed in a children's playground.

In an address on his Telegram channel, Zelensky said those who carried out Saturday's attacks were inhuman.

Switching from Ukrainian to Russian, he then attacked Putin.

"Your leader wants to show you that he's leading from the front, and his military is behind him," he said.

"But in fact he is hiding. He's hiding behind his military, his missiles, the walls of his residences and palaces.

"He's hiding behind you, and he's burning your country and your future. No-one will forgive you for terror. No-one in the world will forgive you for that. Ukraine will not forgive."

New year in Putin's Russia - nothing is normal - This year's festive extravaganzas on Russian TV are a strange mixture of let's party and let's win on the battlefield.

This is not normal TV fare for a New Year's night in Russia. Then again, this is not a normal New Year's night. "Normal" disappeared 10 months ago when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

There was nothing "normal" about Putin's New Year address to the Russian people. For his annual speech the president normally stands alone outside the Kremlin. This year, standing behind him, were men and women in combat uniforms.

In his speech last year, he pointed out that "New Year's Eve is literally filled with good cheer and happy thoughts."

Good cheer and happy thoughts were in short supply this time round.

Putin used the address to promote the Kremlin's alternative reality: that in this conflict Russia's the hero and Ukraine and the West are the villains.

"For years, Western elites hypocritically assured us of their peaceful intentions...but in fact, they encouraged the neo-Nazis in every possible way," he said.

"Defending our Motherland is the sacred duty we owe to our ancestors and descendants."

When the Kremlin talks about "defending our Motherland," keep in mind that it was Russia that invaded Ukraine. Not the other way around.

Putin claims his country is benefiting enormously from the dramatic events of 2022: "It was a year of... important steps towards Russia's full sovereignty." "We lay the foundation for our common future, our true independence."

The assertion that, in this war, Russia is fighting for its sovereignty and independence is puzzling, to say the least.

For a start Russia has long been a sovereign, independent nation. Even if you accept Putin's premise that Russia never achieved "full sovereignty" the question arises: why not? Putin's been in power for 23 years. Long enough, you may think, to sort that.

The other thing Putin does in his new year address is to divide Russians into us and them, into those who support his "special military operation" and those who don't.

"It was a year that put many things in their place," the Kremlin leader said, "and drew a clear line between courage and heroism, on the one hand, and betrayal and cowardice on the other..."

In 2023 we're likely to see the Kremlin drawing this line ever more clearly. Russian authorities have mobilised all the country's resources for the "special military operation".

There is no room for debate or discussion: the government expects the public to rally round and to support the president. Those Russians who don't will be made to feel they're betraying their Motherland.

Putin's Russia May 'Never Emerge' From Putin's Dark Forest: Former NATO Commander - Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis warned earlier today that Russian President Putin is leading his country "into a dark forest from which it may never emerge."

Stavridis, a retired U.S. Navy admiral, retweeted a video from a New Year's special that aired on Russian state TV. The clip depicts a singer performing alongside several dancers in colorful garb, with the camera occasionally cutting to the audience where Russian military personnel are seen clapping to the rhythm.

Stavridis then compared the video with other New Year celebrations unfolding across the world.

"A sad contrast to thousands around the world from fireworks Sydney Harbor to crystal ball dropping Times Square celebrating a new year with real joy," he wrote. "Putin continues to lead Russia into a dark forest from which it may never emerge."

Mapping the looting

Based on the photo and video evidence leaked online of Russian soldiers sending used household equipment to their hometowns, Mediazona published one of its key investigations of the year, proving that Russian soldiers were likely stealing not only from Ukrainians on occupied territories, but from their own army, too.

Here's what Mediazona found out:

- In order to trace major delivery routes, Mediazona checked for destinations with more than two large (over a kilogram) shipments incoming in one day from packing stations near the border.
- Suspect packages were found at 13 branches of Russian delivery service CDEK located near the border. These locations match the largest prongs of the Russian assault in Ukraine.
- In the lead among the "suspect" cities was Yurga, a city in the north-west of Kemerovo region. More than 5,5 tonnes of packages were shipped from near-border towns to this place with a population of only 80,000 people. Here's a possible explanation: three major military units are stationed in Yurga: the 106th Separate Logistics Brigade, the 74th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade of the Order of Suvorov Zvenigorod-Berlin and the 120th Artillery Brigade.
- The city of Chebarkul in Chelyabinsk region comes in second place in terms of total weight of shipments received. Two tank regiments, the 6th and 239th, are stationed there.
- A total of 114 suspect packages weighing more than 3,5 tonnes were sent to Kyzyl, the capital of Tyva. The 55th Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade is stationed in Kyzyl. Mediazona confirmed the deaths of 11 servicemen from this city.
- What is more, video footage from the border town of Valuyki shows a Russian military officer came into a CDEK office with a winged device that looked like Orlan, a Russian military drone. The drone was packaged and sent on its way, but Mediazona was not able to trace Orlan drone to its destination.

Containment

France will stand by Ukraine until its victory, French President Emmanuel Macron said in a New Year's Eve speech. "In the year that is starting, we will stand by you, without fail," he said.

Brazilian President-elect Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva met separately on Saturday with representatives of Russia and Ukraine before his inauguration and called for an end to the war between the two countries.

This is important as Brazil is the "B" in BRICS, and an instrumental pillar of support to Putin in international relations. The previous Bolsonaro government ventured nothing negative regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal has thanked Poland for supplying another batch of Starlink satellite communication terminals to his country - "Ukraine received another batch of Starlinks from Poland," Shmyhal announced on the Telegram messaging service on Friday.

"Today they will go to Points of Invincibility, and to support the healthcare and energy sectors," he said.

He added that it was important that Ukrainians stay in touch with their loved ones and that critical infrastructure continues to operate despite difficulties, state news agency Ukrinform reported.

'I'd like to thank the fraternal Polish people'

"I'd like to thank the fraternal Polish people, the Polish government, and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki for the swift help in a time of crisis, which was provided without delay," Shmyhal wrote on Telegram, as quoted by Ukrinform.

"This is the third batch of Starlinks that Ukraine receives from Poland," he added. "And this is the first part of a major batch, which we are set to receive by the end of January."

He thanked "partners and friends from Poland who support Ukraine in its fight for freedom," according to Ukrinform.

Geopolitics

Croatia adopts euro, enters borderless Europe club on New Year – Croatia has switched to the euro and entered Europe's passport-free zone – two important milestones for the country after joining the European Union (EU) nearly a decade ago. At midnight on Sunday, the Balkan nation bid farewell to its kuna currency and became the 20th member of the eurozone.

It is now the 27th nation in the Schengen zone, the world's largest passport-free travel area, which enables more than 400 million people to move freely around its members.

"It is the season of new beginnings. And there is no place in Europe where this is truer than here in Croatia," tweeted EU chief Ursula von der Leyen, as she arrived in Croatia to mark the occasion.

She met Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic and Slovenian President Nataša Pirc Musar at a border crossing with EU member Slovenia.

Croatia, a former Yugoslav republic of 3.9 million people that fought a war of independence in the 1990s, joined the EU in 2013.

Ukraine is in the headlines now. But a whole new world of conflict is about to erupt – Simon Tisdale reporting in **The Guardian** - Taiwan, North Korea, Iran and Palestine are all potential flashpoints that could distract western attention from the invasion in 2023.

It was a good year to bury bad news – and bad deeds – as a clutch of dictators, assorted killers and repressive or anti-democratic regimes can testify. In Myanmar, Yemen, Mali, Nicaragua, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and Afghanistan, to name a few crisis zones, egregious abuses and unrelieved misery attracted relatively scant, perfunctory international scrutiny.

The main reason for 2022's blinkered perspectives is, of course, Ukraine, Europe's biggest conflict since 1945. This is not to say war-torn Tigray or Guatemala, strangled slowly by corruption, would otherwise have made global headline news. Hard truth: western interest in developing-world conflicts is generally limited.

Yet Ukraine, as viewed from Europe and North America, and trumping other strategic and humanitarian crises, has monopolized political and media attention, aid and assistance efforts, and the popular imagination to an unprecedented degree. Knock-on cost of living increases ensured the war hit home in the west.

All the same, other international crises, actual or looming, will demand increased attention and resources in 2023. Three geopolitical battlegrounds in particular may be harder to ignore: **China's domineering behaviour in east Asia, the Middle East quagmire, and US-Europe tensions.**

Whether extraneous events and shifting priorities will ultimately undermine Ukraine's ability to resist and defeat Russia is unknowable at this point. That they will do so is surely Putin's best hope. For all their admirable courage, Ukrainians are more dependent than ever on unstinting western, principally US, support going into a second year of war.

Could they find themselves increasingly sidelined, especially if the war descends into prolonged stalemate? Rising military tensions in east Asia require particular attention, as illustrated by Japan's stunning decision to roughly double defence spending.

Japan is ninth in the world in military expenditure. It now prospectively moves up to third, behind the US and China. More significantly, this shift marks a sharp break, if not an end, to Japan's post-1945 pacifist tradition, which forbade, for example, involvement in overseas conflicts. Remarkably, polls suggest strong public support.

What is driving this change? The same factors that have induced South Korea and other regional countries to raise their game militarily, prompted the formation of AUKUS (the Australia, UK and US security pact) and are feeding deeper cooperation within the Quad (the US, India, Japan and Australia).

All these countries harbour a common fear: **China**. Beijing is aggressively extending its regional military reach. It is pursuing old territorial disputes with neighbours, including Japan and India, and creating new ones in the South China Sea. Last week, its forces again laid aerial siege to Taiwan.

Well-founded worries that China could attempt, in 2023, to make good Xi Jinping's threat to seize Taiwan by force keep Pentagon wargamers busy. Could the US realistically take on China as well as Russia, effectively defending Taiwan and Ukraine at the same time?

When Gen Mark Milley, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, recently suggested Ukraine consider peace talks, this nightmare scenario of war on two fronts was possibly on his mind. Perhaps he, like Japan, was also thinking about a third potential adversary – North Korea and its proliferating nuclear-capable missiles and drones.

The **Middle East**, for decades at the heart of US foreign policy, has been relatively neglected since George W Bush's Iraq debacle and Barack Obama's Syria cop-out. Yet 2023 could be the year when a host of problems arising from this American distancing comes to a head.

Benny Gantz, Israel's outgoing defence minister, last week predicted further, bloody escalation in the occupied **West Bank** resulting from PM Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to give ministerial authority over the area to his anti-Arab coalition partners. Violence involving the Israeli army, Jewish settlers and Palestinians hit record levels in 2022.

Iran is near boiling point, too, owing to sweeping anti-government protests – and because nuclear talks with the west face imminent collapse. Even if Iran makes dramatic concessions, it is hard to see the US president, Joe Biden, cutting a deal with a regime that actively murders and tortures its young women.

Head-on (as opposed to covert) Israel-Iran military confrontation could be one result of a final western rupture with Tehran. That in turn could draw in **Iraq** and **Syria** – more unfinished US business – as well as **Russia**. Meanwhile, Turkey's electorally challenged leader, **Erdoğan**, may attack Syria-based Kurds again – to distract attention from his domestic blunders.

Ukrainians wondering what 2023 may bring have good cause to worry about US-European unity and staying power, too. **Splits among EU countries** over negotiations with Russia may widen as the war grinds on. And there's growing resentment in Washington that the US is taking most of the risks in Ukraine and paying the lion's share of the costs (\$48bn and counting), while the Europeans supposedly revert to piggybacking.

More broadly, transatlantic ties are being tested anew by protectionist elements in Biden's landmark **trade and tech legislation** that have outraged Brussels. A more fundamental, surprising question, as the 2024 presidential election looms, concerns the robustness and integrity of American democracy in the Donald Trump era.

Who knows? Perhaps Putin will be ignominiously deposed. Perhaps Biden and Xi will kiss and make up. Perhaps peace in Palestine is not a mirage after all. One thing is certain in 2023. Ukraine will still receive more support and attention than Afghanistan and dozens of poorer, similarly embattled, less strategically important countries put together.

Russian Mobilization

Novaya Gazeta Europe: To war or to prison? - Back during the period of "hidden mobilisation" in Russia by private war companies and volunteer battalions, Novaya Gazeta Europe discovered 48 regional battalions, each with a unique name, and 11 other groups that were openly recruiting volunteer fighters. Novaya-Europe reporters contacted volunteer fighters and responded to the advertisements to find out more about how this process is organised.

Here's what Novaya-Europe found out:

- Alexander, a former convict who was put on administrative supervision after prison, joined the volunteer battalion Akhmat in the spring. He spent ten days at a military base in Russia's Gudermes, where recruits get taught how to hold and load rifles, practice shooting positions and urgent changing of the magazine, and are introduced to tactical medicine and cartography. After that, he was sent to Ukraine's Sievierodonetsk and given a payout of 300,000 rubles (€4,783).
- Volunteer fighters are given camouflage uniforms for free. If they want additional equipment, they need to buy it themselves. Novaya-Europe's data team has created a calculator of military expenses for starting mercenaries and volunteers.
- According to Alexander, every third volunteer was an ex-convict, some with their criminal records "hanging over them" and some with them erased.
- Only a third of Alexander's unit survived after about two months in Ukraine.
- Novaya-Europe responded to various PMC advertisements to find out the main requirements for potential recruits. Here are some of them: a mercenary should be no younger than 18 and no older than 60; army experience and a military specialization are not required; convictions, even outstanding ones, are allowed; citizens of "unfriendly" countries will not be recruited, however, Ukrainians and descendants from post-Soviet countries can become recruits.

2,000 migrants detained on New Year's night in St. Petersburg – Reports earlier today inform that during New Year's celebrations in the centre of St. Petersburg, local police were conducting a "preventive raid" during which almost 2,000 people "from neighboring countries" were detained, local media outlet Fontanka reports, citing the regional Ministry of Internal Affairs press office.

"Following an inspection, multiple violations of migration legislation had been discovered, in relation to which administrative measures were taken," the police say in a statement.

It is noted that the passages to the Palace Square in the centre of the city were restricted "to ensure people's safety and prevent a stampede and other potential incidents," police officers were also "able to prevent over a dozen attempts to use pyrotechnics."

Comment – It is normal for Russian authorities to conscript arrestees and send them to the front after minimal training. Non-Russians are promised a quick path to Russian citizenship if they join the military for front-line service. Of course they are used as cannon-fodder and the odds of them surviving in order to apply for Russian citizenship are very low.