

Conflict Update # 49

May 4th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Key Takeaways

Russian forces engaged in several unsuccessful ground offensives to the south of Izyum and did not significantly advance efforts to encircle Ukrainian troops in the cauldron to the southeast of Izyum and west of the Donetsk-Luhansk frontline.

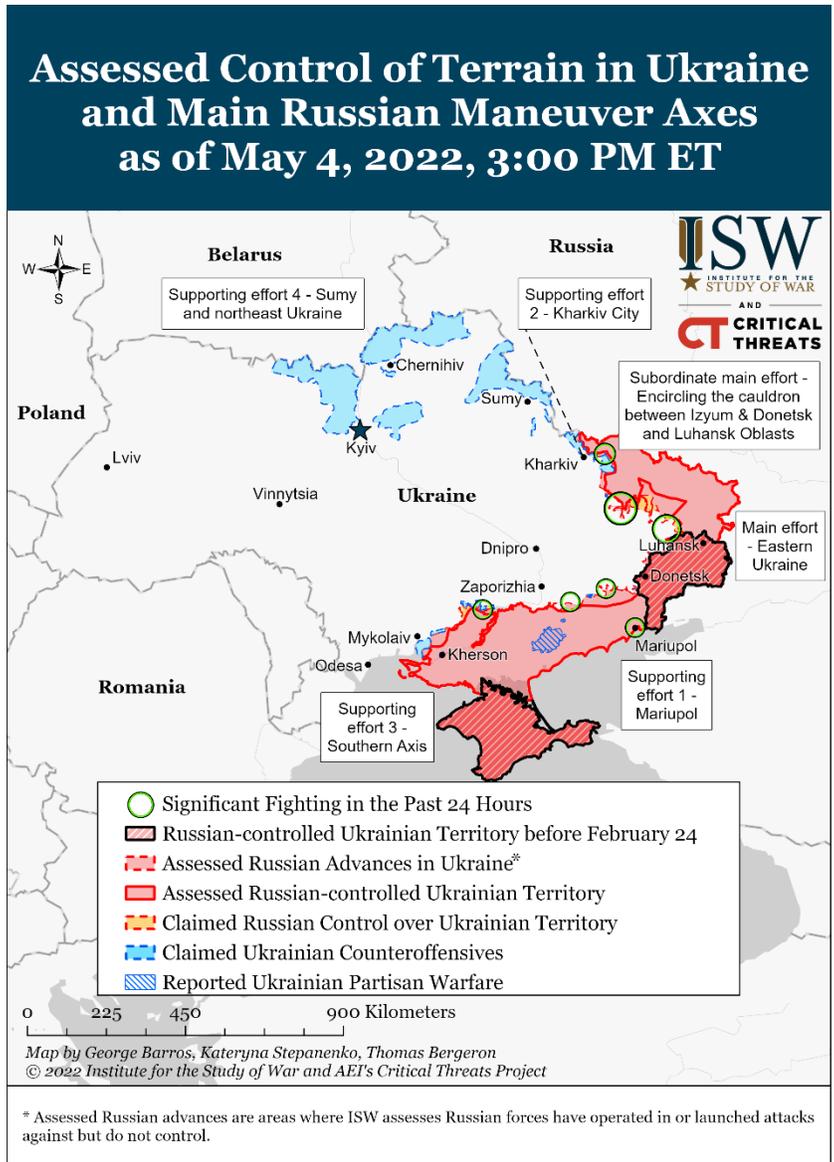
Russian forces reportedly stormed the Azovstal Steel Plant on May 4 and are likely operating inside the plant's facilities.

Russian and Ukrainian sources confirmed that a Ukrainian counteroffensive pushed Russian troops back 40 kilometers from Kharkiv City.

Russian forces conducted a number of unsuccessful counteroffensives on the southern axis.

Subordinate Main Effort— Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts - Russian forces launched several unsuccessful assaults in eastern Ukraine in the last 24 hours but did not advance overall efforts to encircle Ukrainian forces along the frontline around Rubizhne. An unnamed senior US defense official stated that Russian forces are attempting to advance in the Izyum area southeastward towards Lyman, Slovyansk, and Kramatorsk and in an effort to encircle Ukrainian defenses from the south. The official noted that Ukrainian resistance has “stalled” Russian advances in this area and that Russian operations remain uneven.

Ukrainian forces continued to threaten Russian ground lines of communication to Izyum along the E40 highway, destroying a Russian supply convoy in Vesele on May 3. Russian forces heavily shelled Ukrainian positions south and west of Izyum and likely targeted a Ukrainian pontoon bridge across the Siverskyi Donets in Protopoivka. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that Russian forces destroyed the bridge on May 4, but ISW cannot independently confirm this claim.



The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are attacking south towards Lyman from northeastern Luhansk Oblast alongside the Izyum effort. Russian forces reportedly made unspecified advances in the direction of Shandryholove, about 15 kilometers north of Lyman. Russian forces are unlikely to have seized Yampil (roughly 10 kilometers southeast of Lyman) as of May 4 based on satellite images of large fires in the area following Russian artillery and missile strikes.

Russian forces have likely partially encircled several frontline settlements in Luhansk Oblast. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Rubizhne and Popasna residents have one more week worth of water and food supplies as of May 4. Drone footage also showed Russian Wagner mercenaries fighting a Ukrainian soldier in Popasna, indicating that Russian forces are continuing grinding block-by-block advances within the city.

Supporting Effort #1—Mariupol - Russian forces reportedly entered the Azovstal Steel Plant for the first time – rather than its outskirts, which they have contested for several weeks – on May 4. Multiple Ukrainian sources stated that Russian troops successfully “broke into” Azovstal and that the Ukrainian government has lost communications with Ukrainian defenders within the plant as a result. ISW cannot confirm the extent of Russian advances within Azovstal at this time but will continue to provide updates as the situation unfolds.

An unnamed senior US defense official estimated that 2 Russian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) “cobbled together” from various damaged units and unspecified Chechen units, amounting to about 2,000 personnel, remain in Mariupol as of May 4. The 10 damaged BTGs that have previously redeployed from Mariupol are reportedly still undergoing rest and refit and have not been committed to offensive operations in eastern Ukraine. This report is consistent with ISW’s previous assessment that most Russian forces have left Mariupol, leaving smaller elements to finish capturing Azovstal.

Supporting Effort #2—Kharkiv City - Russian forces continued to reconnoiter and conduct air and artillery strikes on Ukrainian positions in Kharkiv City and surrounding settlements on May 4. Ukrainian forces did not conduct any confirmed counterattacks in the last 24 hours. However, additional Russian and Ukrainian sources notably confirmed the extent of the previously-reported Ukrainian counteroffensive that pushed Russian forces 40 kilometers east of Kharkiv to Staryi Saltiv.

Supporting Effort #3—Southern Axis - Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful ground offensive in the direction of Zaporizhia City and intensified shelling in Kherson Oblast on May 4. The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Russian forces may intend to conduct additional offensives in Zaporizhia and Kryvyi Rih areas while continuing operations in Donbas. Russian forces attempted unsuccessful assaults on Novosilka, Donetsk Oblast, and Orihiv, Zaporizhia Oblast, likely to push towards the N15 highway running from Donetsk to Zaporizhia City. Ukrainian artillery continued to target Russian supply lines running to occupied Zaporizhia Oblast settlements from Donbas, destroying a Russian convoy on May 4.

Russian forces intensified shelling in southwest and northeast Kherson Oblast on May 4. The Kherson Oblast Administration reported that Russian forces are attempting to launch offensives on Knyazivka, Mala Shestirnya, and Novovoznesenske to gain a foothold in Mykolaiv and Dnepropetrovsk Oblasts. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command South reported reestablishing control over four unspecified villages on the Kherson-Mykolaiv Oblast border likely in the Snihurivka area, but ISW cannot confirm Ukrainian claims or the location of the reportedly liberated villages.

Supporting Effort #4—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine - The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced a “sudden test” of the reaction forces of the Belarusian Armed Forces today and stated that the inspection will test the readiness and overall ability of troops to respond to “crisis situations” and will involve simulated land and air threats. The inspection will reportedly entail significant movement of military vehicles and equipment. The readiness test is unlikely to impact the situation on the northeastern axis in Ukraine, and Belarusian forces remain unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine, but ISW will continue to monitor the situation and provide updates as necessary.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces will likely continue to merge offensive efforts southward of Izyum with westward advances from Donetsk in order to encircle Ukrainian troops in southern Kharkiv Oblast and Western Donetsk.
- Russia may change the status of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, possibly by merging them into a single "Donbas Republic" and/or by annexing them directly to Russia.
- Russian forces have apparently decided to seize the Azovstal plant through ground assault and will likely continue operations accordingly.
- Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kharkiv City may unhinge Russian positions northeast of the city, possibly forcing the Russians to choose between reinforcing those positions or abandoning them if the Ukrainians continue to press their counter-attack.
- Russian forces may be preparing to conduct renewed offensive operations to capture the entirety of Kherson Oblast in the coming days.

Uptick in Combat Missions Signals Changing Role for Russia's Air Force in Ukraine - A spate of airstrikes by Russian combat jets in eastern Ukraine last week was a sign that Russia's Air Force may be changing tack after failing to achieve aerial superiority over Ukraine, analysts told The Moscow Times.

Russian pilots have largely taken a risk-averse approach to air combat in the two-month war, choosing to attack ground targets inside Ukraine with long-range missiles rather than making themselves vulnerable to anti-aircraft missile systems with long flights over enemy territory.

Huge Fireball in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia as Blaze Breaks Out – A video shared on social media showed a blaze in a Russian city that reportedly started after fuel tanks caught fire.

The blaze broke out on Wednesday in an industrial zone of Nizhny Novgorod, which is about 260 miles east of Moscow. The clip showed emergency services at the site and smoke billowing up.

The regional department of the Ministry of Emergency Situations said on Russian social media site VK that there were no injuries and no threat to settlements or the population. There have been a number of reports of Russian infrastructure being targeted by Ukraine's forces in the last few weeks.

On Monday, aerial video showed a Russian ammunition depot exploding into a huge ball of smoke and fire following Ukrainian mortar strikes.

This may be why Putin suspects British SAS operator are on the ground. This is a typical tactic used by them.

'They Deceived Us at Every Step': Troops Say Russia's War Is in Shambles - Troops despatched into Ukraine to again up Russian forces say that they had no selection however to go away as a result of Russian army was in shambles and "they deceived us at every step."

Soldiers from the breakaway state of South Ossetia—chatting with South Ossetian chief Anatoly Bibilov at a gathering publicized by the impartial information outlet MediaZona—rattled off a listing of complaints about defective tools, lack of management and intel, and brainless techniques.

South Ossetia, which depends closely on army and monetary help from Russia, despatched troops to Ukraine in late March to "defend Russia." Ukrainian army officers stated at the time that some 150 South Ossetian troops had been becoming a member of forces with Russia, however Tskhinvali by no means gave any official figures.

Many of the troopers are stated to be a part of Russian army items primarily based in South Ossetia; Moscow and Tskhinvali struck a deal in 2017 to partially incorporate their armed forces.

But stories quickly surfaced of lots of them refusing to participate in the battle, vowing to not turn into “cannon fodder.” “Nobody got scared here, it’s just that they deceived us at every step,” one of many troopers informed Bibilov of their resolution to desert the battle.

“Of the 11 days [that we were there,] I wouldn’t even wish on an enemy what happened there. All the equipment didn’t work, I’m telling you straight... There was no command staff,” one other soldier informed the South Ossetian chief.

Out of 10 tanks, the primary soldier stated, solely three fired. “The artillery mortar for the mortar-gunners didn’t work, the legs were all crooked,” he stated.

“There was no command. And if the officers didn’t know what to do, what is the sergeant doing there?” one other soldier was quoted saying.

He stated “99 percent of the equipment” in one other unit didn’t even work, however when the troops warned the senior in command that their automobiles didn’t work and their weapons “did not fire,” he shrugged it off and stated to simply “go like that.”

In one other case, troops complained of their commander “disappearing” each time preventing began.

“He was afraid of his own men. He made himself a security team out of a few of the guys. The commander refused to come out and talk to his own guys and was saying that he’d be beaten,” one soldier stated.

Eventually, “some guys from spetsnaz [special forces]” actually did beat him and left his “face all bloody,” he stated.

They stated the Russian troops by no means had backup plans, or escape routes. Another soldier stated considered one of his wounded comrades in Russian-occupied Donetsk was getting no medical care.

“He says that the first day they bandaged him, but there’s still shrapnel inside him. He says his hand is very swollen, and nobody is doing anything, the doctors aren’t even coming to see him. He’s been there for five days, and the doctors are only asking him for money,” he stated.

After listening to the troopers paint an image of such utter dysfunction, Bibilov requested the lads immediately in the event that they imagine Russia will lose the struggle.

One soldier spoke up: “Yes, we believe they will lose.”

Putin

Vladimir Putin May Be Suffering From Parkinson’s Or Cancer, Former Russian Spy Claims - As rumors about Vladimir Putin’s declining health have been swirling around him following recent public appearances, an ex-spy for Russia, Boris Karpichkov, said he believed the rumors and also added that Putin is likely suffering from intense paranoia and believes he is surrounded by “traitors.”

Putin has a problem - Are Russian Soldiers Breaking Their Own Tanks? - Ukraine has slowly become a graveyard of Russian tanks and other armored vehicles. Hundreds of tanks have reportedly been destroyed since Moscow launched its unprovoked invasion in late February, and while Ukrainian fighters have successfully used Javelin and NLAW anti-tank missiles to take out the Russian vehicles, there is now evidence circulating online that some of the invaders are breaking their own equipment in order not to have to fight.

According to the newly released audio of a conversation between a Russian soldier and his parents that the Security Service of Ukraine intercepted, the invading forces had suffered so many losses that the soldiers opted to break the only tank that remained intact to avoid going to the front. In a phone call, a seemingly young Russian told his father that his unit had ten tanks at the beginning of the war. After nine were destroyed, the tanker decided to break it on purpose after fearing that they'd be killed if they continued to fight on.

Why Putin Scaled Back Russia's Big Military Parade - Putin Won't Be Happy: Russia Scales Back Victory Day Parade – Russia's Victory Day parade, an annual parade held on May 9 that celebrates the victory over Nazi Germany, has reportedly been scaled down this year.

Reports suggest that the military parade, which is usually an opportunity for Russia to demonstrate its military prowess, has been scaled back by as much as 35% amidst continued aggression in Ukraine.

Putin Won't Declare War on Ukraine on Victory Day Despite Western Fears, Kremlin Says - Putin will not formally declare war against Ukraine on Victory Day on Monday, the Kremlin says, despite growing fears in the West that the Russian leader will move beyond the "special military operation" that he currently calls his invasion of the former Soviet ally and unleash the full breadth of Russia's military might.

Aha, but they said the same regarding invading Ukraine. Russia is planning a military parade in the embattled city of Mariupol, Ukraine's intelligence service said on Wednesday. The parade is set to be held in the south-eastern Ukrainian city on 9 May to coincide with Moscow's Victory Day Parade, which celebrates its victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Mariupol "will become the centre of celebrations", said the Ukrainian Military Intelligence (GUR) in a statement published on Telegram.

Putin planning victory parade in Mariupol, says Ukrainian intelligence - Russia is planning a military parade in the embattled city of Mariupol, Ukraine's intelligence service said on Wednesday.

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NATO

Keeping Any NATO Ratification Period Short Is Key to Finland, Says PM - Finland, which is considering whether to apply for membership to the NATO alliance, said that keeping any transition period as short as possible would be important for its security, Prime Minister Sanna Marin said on Wednesday.

"The key issue is to keep the ratification process as short as possible ... That would be the best security guarantee," Sanna Marin told a joint news conference with her Nordic counterparts in the Danish capital.

Sanctions

UK cuts Russia off from management services - Russia has been banned from using British management consulting, accounting and PR services in new sanctions announced by the UK. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said the ban will cut off service exports "critical to the Russian economy". Ms Truss said the ban will "help ensure Putin fails in Ukraine".

Other sanctions among the 63 introduced on Wednesday target Russian media organisations and those working for them. The government said UK accountancy, management consultancy and PR services account for 10% of Russian imports in these sectors. "Doing business with Putin's regime is morally bankrupt and helps fund a war machine that is causing untold suffering across Ukraine," said Ms Truss.

EU Can't Rely on OPEC for Help Quitting Russian Oil - Europe's strenuous effort to break its dependence on Russian energy isn't getting any support from the OPEC cartel.

The EU is going after Russia's global oil sales by cracking down on anyone from insurers to ship owners, report says - The European Union is planning to phase out imports of Russian oil to cut off financing for Moscow's war in Ukraine, but it's not stopping there.

It's also proposing a ban on European ships and companies providing any service related to the shipment of Russian crude and refined products anywhere in the world — such as financing, insurance, or even technical support — according to draft legislation seen by Bloomberg.

Russia produces some 11 million barrels of oil a day, roughly equal to 10% of total world daily output. It exports around 7 million barrels a day to customers around the globe, on tankers and through a vast network of pipelines that stretch to Karlsruhe on the German/French border and all the way to Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan to the east.

Humanitarian

'They Were Shot In The Head': Beloved Son, Son-In-Law Among Victims Of 'Deliberate Cruelty' In Russian War On Ukraine – When Russian troops entered Stariy Bykiv on February 27, three days after the invasion of Ukraine began, they took her adult son and son-in-law from her courtyard by force, saying they would be questioned and then released later in the day.

They did not come back that evening, though, and when they had still not returned the next morning, Vovk, growing anxious, set off with a cousin to search for them.

She found them not far from her home -- lying dead along with four other bodies next to an abandoned, windowless, one-story building.

"They were shot in the head," Vovk told RFE/RL in an interview at her home in Stariy Bykiv, about 100 kilometers east of Kyiv in the Chernihiv region of northern Ukraine.

An examination conducted by Ukrainian authorities weeks later indicated that her son, Bohdan Hladkiy, 29, and son-in-law, Oleksandr Mohyrchuk, 38, had been tortured before they were shot. One had an artery cut while the other had punctures to the heart and broken ribs, Vovk said.

Almost 600 civilians died in theater bombing - Evidence suggests close to 600 civilians died in the Russian airstrike on the Mariupol drama theater on March 16 that horrified the world and helped galvanize support for Ukraine's effort to repel the invasion, according to an Associated Press investigation.

The theater had been used as a bomb shelter in the early days of Russia's siege of the port city and had large warnings visible from the sky reading "children" in Russian.

AP's death total is twice the city government's estimate and marks the deadliest single known attack against civilians in the war. AP said its journalists drew on accounts of 23 survivors, rescuers and people intimately familiar with the shelter operating at the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater. It also used two sets of floor plans of the theater, photos and video taken inside before, during and after that day.

Most witnesses said around 1,000 people were in the theater at the time of the assault.

Dozens of nations have provided military and/or humanitarian aid to Ukraine. The U.S. has committed \$3.7 billion in weapons and other aid and President Joe Biden is seeking an additional \$33 billion from Congress.

Russia 'steals 400,000 tons of grain' from Ukraine to spark famine warning - Ukraine has accused Moscow of stealing hundreds of thousands of tonnes of grain in regions Russian troops are occupying.

Vladimir Putin ordered his troops to invade Ukraine in February but, after failing to take over the capital of Kyiv, ordered a new offensive in the southeast of the county in a bid to fully take over the Donbas region.

Ukraine is a major exporter of grain and sold 44.7 million tonnes abroad in 2020/21- making it the world's fourth-largest supplier.

Containment

U.S. asks Israel to increase military aid to Ukraine - The Biden administration last week asked the Israeli government to consider increasing its military aid to Ukraine, U.S. and Israeli officials told me.

Why it matters: In its careful approach to the war, Israel has so far refused Ukraine's requests for advanced weaponry, and only last month agreed to send thousands of helmets and bulletproof vests for medical teams and first responders.

But as Israel takes a more critical public line against Russia, it is signaling more openness to supplying Ukraine with certain nonlethal military equipment.

Behind the scenes: Israel last week sent Dror Shalom, the head of the political-military bureau at the Ministry of Defense, to Ramstein Air Base in Germany for a U.S.-led meeting on sending weapons to Ukraine.

For the Ukrainian military, a long partnership with U.S. National Guard units is paying dividends - Behind much of the Ukrainian military's success against Russia is a little-known Department of Defense initiative built around state national guards.

The State Partnership Program has quietly become a powerful tool for diplomacy and modeling U.S. values around the world. When the California National Guard's adjutant general, Maj. Gen. David S. Baldwin, got a text from a Ukrainian colonel that Russia had begun invading, his first reaction was concern for his Ukrainian military friends.

"And then also a little bit of a calmer feeling, because I knew that these guys were ready for this fight, and that they were going to do well," Baldwin said.

Baldwin knew that because for nearly 30 years, California's "citizen soldiers" have been helping Ukraine shape its military. And after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, National Guards from several other states began pitching in.

They have taught the Ukrainians sniper skills, ambush tactics, how to fly fighter jets, sophisticated approaches to decision-making, better ways to approach maintenance and logistics, and how to use the Javelin missiles celebrated for destroying so many Russian tanks.

They also helped Ukraine build an asset Russia doesn't have – a cadre of non-commissioned officers who know how to lead the front lines. Troops from Ukraine and California have flown back and forth dozens of times for exercises and training. Baldwin lost count of his own visits to Ukraine after 40. "Yes, we do increase actual combat capability of our partners and disaster response capability," Baldwin said. "But what we really deliver is this notion of the United States is there to help your country." The Ukrainians say that's true.

Impacts

Doubling Down on Lavrov Comments, Russia Accuses Israel of Backing ‘Neo-Nazis’ in Ukraine - Diplomatic tensions between Israel and Russia deepened on Tuesday after the Russian foreign ministry accused Jerusalem of supporting “neo-Nazis” in Ukraine, as it doubled down on Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s earlier assertion that Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler had “Jewish blood.”

In a reply to Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid’s condemnation of Lavrov’s “unforgivable and outrageous” comments, the foreign ministry in Moscow stated that Lapid’s “anti-historical” reaction explained “to a large extent why the current Israeli government supports the neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv.”

The statement repeated the Russian government’s insistence that Ukraine is governed by neo-Nazis, despite the fact that President Volodymyr Zelensky is Jewish. “How can there be Nazism in Ukraine if he is a Jew? I may be mistaken but Adolf Hitler had Jewish blood, too,” Lavrov claimed in his original interview with an Italian broadcaster. “This means absolutely nothing. The wise Jewish people say that the most ardent antisemites are usually Jews.”

The furious reaction from Israeli and western leaders to Lavrov’s remarks did little to shift the Russian position, with the foreign ministry listing a series of alleged Ukrainian offenses against Jews. “Despite the existence of the law ‘On Preventing and Combating Antisemitism in Ukraine,’ its norms do not apply,” the ministry’s statement said.

Pope Francis clearly points the finger at Russia - In an unusual interview, Pope Francis finally blames Putin as responsible for the war and suffering in Ukraine, writes DW's Christoph Strack.

Widening of conflict and war

Fires, explosions and false-flag operations: How war is spilling beyond Ukraine’s borders - So-called “shadow wars” in Russia and Moldova have many worried about the spread of conflict. US military tracking mysterious Russian ship near Hawaii.

Russia accuses Western powers of waging a “proxy war” via Ukraine. President Joe Biden refers to the conflict as not just a war between Russia and Ukraine but an attack on the “free world.” And some of Ukraine’s supporters say we’re already in World War III. Given the number of countries now involved in the war and the rhetoric they’re employing, it’s almost surprising that the violence — at least in terms of open fighting between militaries — has been largely confined inside the country’s borders.

More than two months into the war, that may be changing. We still haven’t seen the direct NATO vs. Russia combat that many fear, but increasingly, the violence is spilling beyond Ukraine’s frontiers.

Recent attacks on Russian soil and in Transnistria, a semi-autonomous region of Moldova, have been shrouded in murkiness and confusion, making it hard to predict where they might lead. But taken together, these very different incidents suggest the war is spreading outside Ukraine.

Mysterious incidents on Russian soil - There have also been a number of mysterious fires at sites near Moscow, well outside the range of Ukrainian drones and missiles: a military research institute in Tver, a chemical plant in Kineshma, an aerospace college in Korolyov.

Most recently, on Monday morning, the governor of Belgorod reported two new explosions, just a day after a fire at a ministry of defense facility of the region. All in all, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has tallied at least a dozen such incidents in Russia over the last month.

The Ukrainian government has been coy about the spate of fires and explosions; they haven't claimed responsibility, but they haven't denied it either. Zelensky's Senior Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak described them as "karma" for the Russian invasion. But if it's not Ukrainian military action, the only other likely explanations are sabotage carried out by Ukrainian agents or sympathetic Russians.