

Conflict Update # 192

September 24th, 2022

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Conflict Assessment

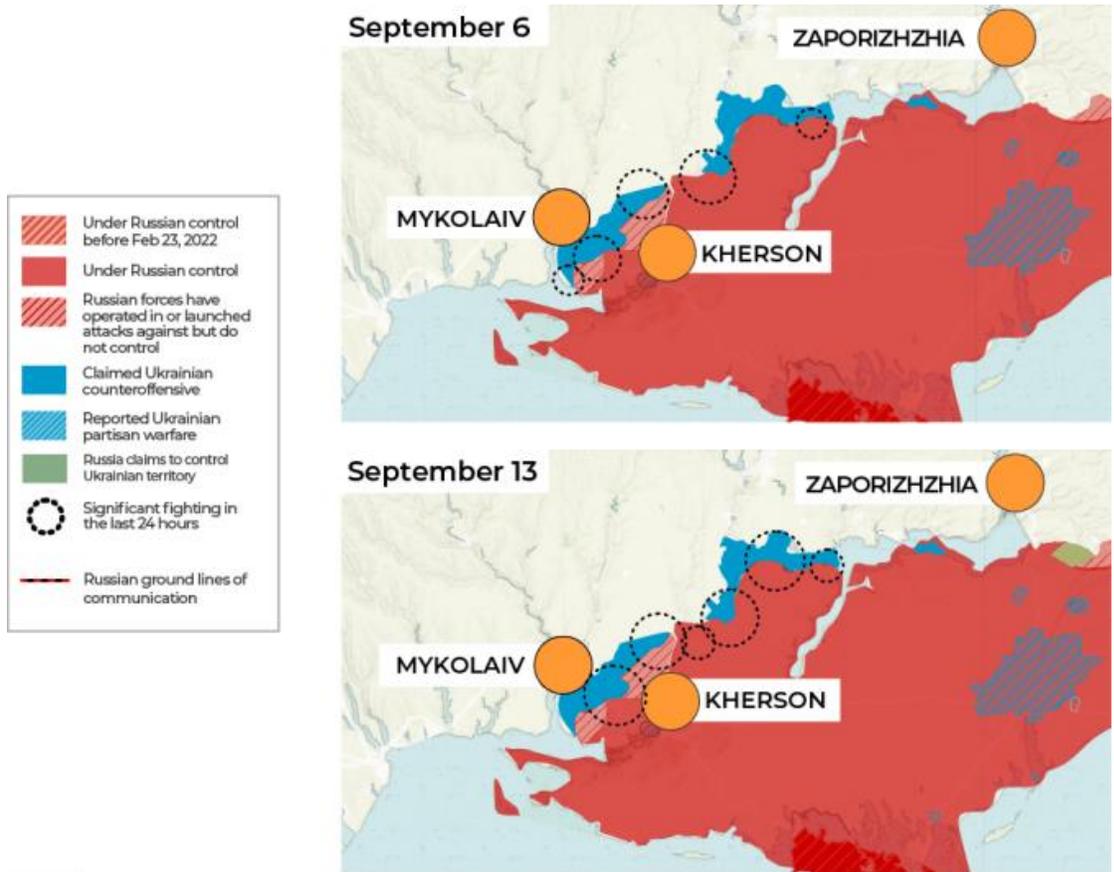
Russian losses – 56,300 (+240) soldiers killed, 2,262 (+8) enemy tanks, 4,807 (+11) armored combat vehicles, 1,361 (+6) artillery systems, 327 (+9) MLRS systems, 170 (+0) air defense systems, 255 (+1) warplanes, 219 (+0) helicopters, 956 (+6) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 240 (+0) cruise missiles, 15 (+0) warships/cutters, 3,681 (+22) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 76 fuel bowsers (+0) and 125 (+0) units of specialized equipment.

Key Takeaways

Ukraine’s Counteroffensive - Adding to a burgeoning list of setbacks faced by Russian forces in Ukraine is the reported destruction of a Russian barge ferrying military hardware and troops across the Dnipro river near the Ukrainian city of Nova Kakhovka—on a day when a Ukrainian official claimed Russian forces had been trapped by the river due to the counteroffensive in the Kherson region, pushing them further south.

According to the Ukrainian Defence Forces of the South spokeswoman, “the fire control that we maintain over crossings and transport arteries across the Dnipro makes them (Russian forces) understand that they are sandwiched between the (Ukrainian) defence forces and the right (river) bank – units that are in this part of the Kherson region.”

Figure 1 to the right shows an increase in areas witnessing intense fighting between 6 and 13 September 2022, as a result of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south.



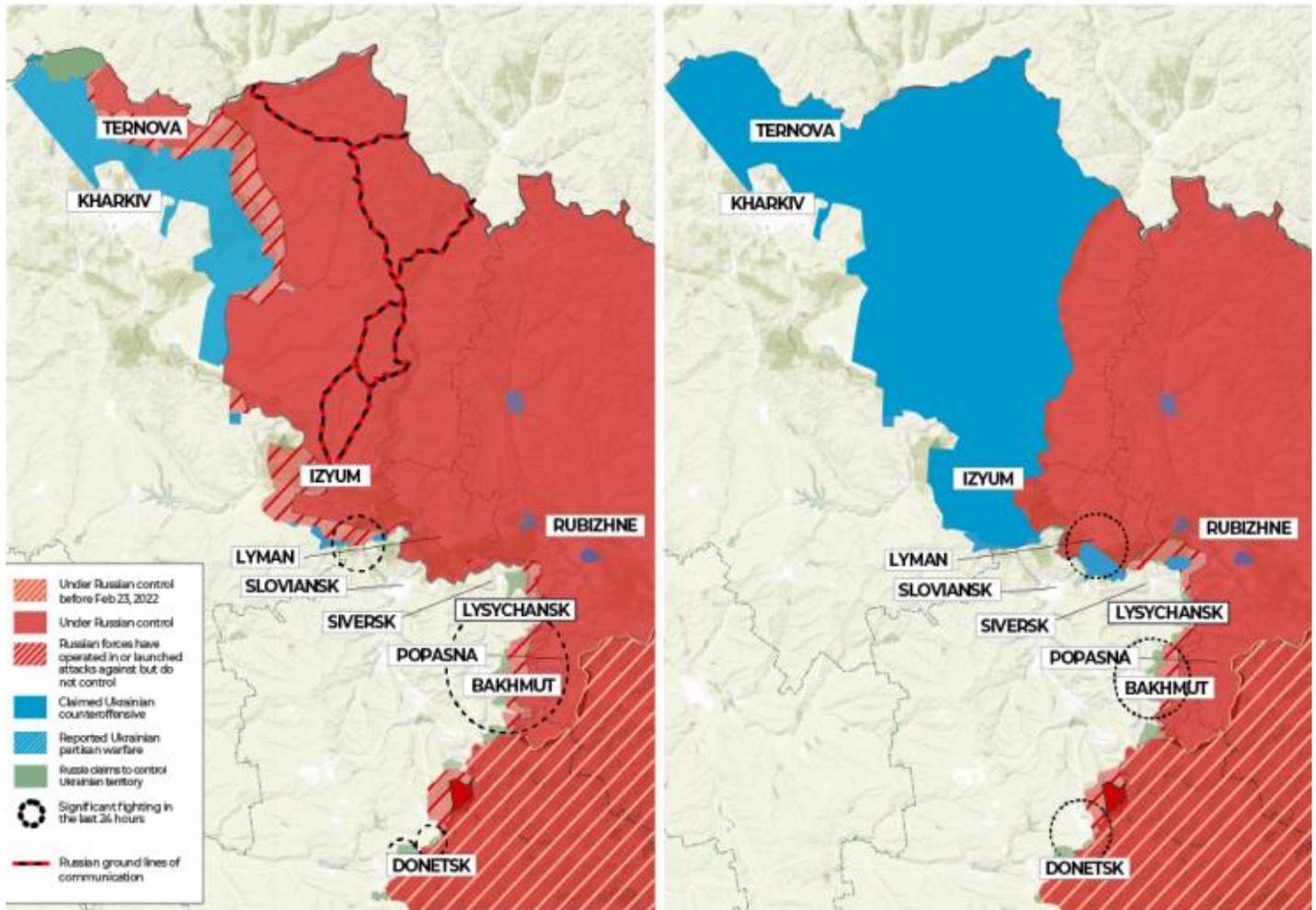
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However, Russian forces seem to be faring far worse in the northeast with much of the territorial losses in the Kharkiv region since the beginning of September. Inflicting a significant operational setback on the Russian military, Ukrainian forces have recaptured a vast expanse of territory including the city of Izyum (see Figure 2 below).

Day 195 - September 6, 2022

Day 203 - September 14, 2022



Source: ©Mapbox, ©OpenStreetMap | Institute for the Study of War | September 14, 2022

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The Ukrainian success in this region is a consequence of its smaller southern offensive, which led the Russian forces to redeploy to Donetsk and the southern axis, thereby, creating vulnerabilities in the northeast for Ukrainian fighters to exploit.

Kremlin-backed commander Alexander Khodakovskiy described the Ukrainian strategic masterstroke as “an interesting technique: they achieved success in one direction (Kherson region), brought us to a state where we do not think about any offensive in this direction, only about stabilizing the front line, and (Ukrainian) offensive surpluses are transferred to another sector (Kharkiv region).” The former political leader in the self-declared Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) in eastern Ukraine added that “a developed transport infrastructure allows them to maneuver with limited forces creating accumulations in places where it is necessary according to the plan, and the presence of a plan and success in its implementation is the possession of a strategic initiative.”

Referendum

Following their swift withdrawal from the Kharkiv region, Russian forces may attempt to buy time by digging deep and hardening their defensive lines in the Donbas. This would not only allow the Russian forces to resupply and regroup but also once again turn the ongoing conflict into a protracted war of attrition.

Further, referendum announcements by the Russian-backed, self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) and DPR may be designed to provoke the Ukrainian forces into attempting hastily planned deeper incursions into Russian strongholds. Without securing their logistics and flanks, such offensives would be perilous.

Thankfully for Ukraine, its forces seem to be looking to consolidate their advancements even as Russian forces target its power infrastructure, causing power cuts across the country. However, Ukraine has expressed fears that Russia would step up attacks on its energy system to turn the tables on Kyiv this winter.

Annexation

There is also the very real possibility of Moscow formally annexing some of the regions it currently occupies, through referendums. This would then provide an excuse for declaring war on Ukraine and undertaking mass mobilisation if Ukrainian forces attempt to recapture any of the newly appropriated Russian territories. And while Vadym Skibitsky, Deputy Head of Ukraine's military intelligence, has argued that mass mobilisation "would mean recognizing that Russia has not been able to fulfil all the tasks it declared, that (Russian President) Putin's so-called 'special operation' has not achieved results, and real war is being fought," there should be at least some consternation in Ukrainian strategic circles regarding the possible military implications of the same.

Former Russian President and current Deputy Chairman of the Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev said that the result of referendums would be permanent and grant Moscow—which possesses the world's largest nuclear arsenal—complete leeway to protect what it would consider by law as Russian territory. "Encroachment onto Russian territory is a crime which allows you to use all the forces of self-defense," he stated in a Telegram post, adding that "this is why these referendums are so feared in Kyiv and the West." He further stated that no future Russian leader would be able to constitutionally reverse their outcome.

Outlook

Though Ukraine's recent battlefield successes have resulted largely due to the strategic ingenuity of Kyiv's military planning, efficient logistics management, and international military assistance, it would be difficult to sustain the momentum of the offensives without leaving vulnerabilities in supply lines and exposing newly reclaimed territories to Russian counterattacks. The task would become even more difficult as winter begins to set in, forcing war planners on both sides to prioritize the survival of personnel over military adventurism.

On the other hand, failure to recapture a significant part of the Donbas before winter may further exacerbate the difficult choices available to Ukraine. It may either be pressured into ceding significant territory to Russia if Western support for its war effort wavers in the face of dwindling Russian energy supplies to European and other supporting countries or might be faced with the prospect of a prolonged war of attrition post-winter, by which time the Russians would have reinforced themselves in most occupied parts of the Donbas and possibly annexed the same formally.

While much has been made by some western observers of the reduced room for manoeuvrability for Russian strategic planners due to alleged internal hostility to the war and vocal criticism from friends India and China, the Kremlin is likely to double down on its efforts to secure its presence in the Donbas industrial region, which it views as the "yoke" of Ukraine. And with Moscow announcing the partial mobilisation of 300,000 personnel from its pool of reserves to support its military campaign, it appears that the Russians are in no hurry to negotiate with Kyiv from a position of weakness.

Russians are retreating, Armed Forces of Ukraine are destroying their equipment and weapons - Russian occupiers are gradually retreating in the South of Ukraine. Ukraine's armed forces managed to destroy the areas where their equipment and weapons are concentrated.

Says Natalia Humeniuk, the head of the press centre of Operational Command Pivden (South) "The fighting is fierce, it is quite hot here in the south, despite the fact that the weather has become a little cooler. The fire is coming from one side and from the other. But the enemy is still giving way; we are securing territories, little by little. And this stresses the Russian forces out, so the shelling becomes more or less intense, depending on the amount of [Russian] ammunition we hit during the night...

We landed quite significant hits over the past day; these [targets] are control points, command posts, and areas of concentration of equipment and weapons, as well as people, but we do not see the results yet, because they are still being investigated. It is clear that it is more difficult to estimate such results in the occupied territory. But we are very grateful to the local population, [and] very grateful to the resistance movement; they help us in this, and we are sure that by the evening the report [on Russia's losses] will be quite powerful."

Ukrainian Armed Forces strike over 40 areas where Russian troops were concentrated - Ukraine repelled Russian attacks near 10 towns and villages and struck around 40 areas where Russian military personnel and equipment were concentrated on Friday, 23 September.

The Ukrainian Command posted "Over the course of the past 24 hours, Russian invaders have carried out five missile strikes and 14 air strikes, as well as over 60 attacks using multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS), striking military and civilian targets across Ukraine in violation of international humanitarian laws and the laws and customs of war."

General Staff of Armed Forces of Ukraine reveals where Russia could send new conscripts - The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine supposes that Russians plan to supplement their formations and military units that are fighting in Ukraine on the first stage of the partial mobilisation. Part of those forces could also be sent to supplement Russia's Border Guard.

"According to Russia's mobilisation plans, approximately 300,000 people will be subject to conscription. Based on the preliminary evaluations, this military call-up will have at least two stages, or more.

During the first stage, which will take place probably in a month or a month and a half, the enemy is going to supplement its formations and military units that are engaged in conducting military actions on the territory of Ukraine to the point where the staff is 100% complete. It is also possible that some of these forces will be sent to supplement the Border Service of the Federal Security Service of Russia, in order to free military personnel of the units of their Armed Forces that are involved in covering the border with our country."

Details: According to Hromov, the biggest part of those subject to conscription are going to be sergeants, privates, as well as low-rank officers. "This is the category [of servicemen] that has suffered the most significant losses on the enemy's side," he explained.

Hromov also pointed out that, according to Ukrainian intelligence, the Kremlin's haste in announcing the partial mobilization is due to increased internal and external threats to Putin's regime.

"First and foremost, it is [due to] the inability of the current Russian government to reach the announced goals of "a special military operation", an increasing support of Ukraine by Western countries, and our state's continued course towards NATO membership. It is also due to aggravation of social and economic problems in Russia, as well as strengthening of sanction pressure on the Russian Federation," Hromov stated.

Ukrainian Armed Forces prevent Russia from using Kakhovka Bridge to transfer military equipment -

The Armed Forces of Ukraine prevented Russia's attempt to transfer a convoy of military equipment from one bank of the River Dnipro to the other via the [Nova] Kakhovka Bridge.

Ukrainian Armed Forces also successfully struck a Russian pontoon crossing near Lvove, and their rocket artillery units carried out around 280 firing missions, striking two command posts (in Beryslav and Nova Kakhovka), three areas where Russian military personnel and equipment were concentrated (in the Kherson and Kakhovka districts) and an ammunition storage point (in the Beryslav district).

Russia has taken out Soviet-era tanks from storage amid war - Amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, a video showing multiple Soviet-era tanks lined up on railway tracks in Russia has surfaced online. Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine's minister of internal affairs, shared the clip on Twitter and claimed that Russia has taken out more of its 50-year-old T-62 tanks from storage in order to deploy them in the Ukraine war.

"Old Soviet tanks taken out of conservation by Russia - with no protection against modern weapons," Mr Gerashchenko wrote in the caption.

"And new Russian conscripts (also with no protection against modern weapons and a modern army - we've seen what they fight in). Perfect combination, doomed for success, I would say," he added.

Dmitry Bulgakov: Putin fires deputy defence chief amid supply failures - Putin has fired the general charged with managing the Russian military's faltering logistics operations in Ukraine.

Gen Bulgakov, deputy defence minister, was removed today, the defence ministry said on Telegram, saying the 67-year old was "released" to transfer into a new role.

He will be replaced by Col Gen Mikhail Mizintsev, who managed Moscow's brutal siege at the port city of Mariupol.

Gen Bulgakov has run the military's logistics operations since 2008 and was responsible for keeping Russian troops supplied after their deployment to Syria in 2015.

But observers say he has become side-lined in Moscow in recent months, with many blaming him for the chaotic logistics operations that have dogged Russia's advance and seen their troops left undersupplied.

In recent months, the Kremlin was forced to approach North Korea and Iran - two of its only remaining allies - for new artillery and drone supplies.

Gen Bulgakov's dismissal comes as footage circulated on social media showing newly drafted Russian recruits being equipped with rusty assault rifles.

Influx of Russian Iranian drone attacks in Ukraine – Russia is flooding the eastern Ukrainian skies with imported Kamikaze drones received from Iran.

Ukraine shot down more than a dozen Iranian combat drones across the front lines this week as Russia expands the use of a foreign weapons system that Ukrainian commanders say has inflicted serious damage on their forces.

The Ukrainian Air Force identified them as Shahed-136 unmanned kamikaze drones, or loitering munitions, and Mohajer-6 drones that can carry missiles and be used for reconnaissance. It published a video showing one of the drones it shot out of the sky in Dnipropetrovsk.

The Iranian drones are relatively small and fly at a very low altitude, making it hard for Ukrainian air-defense systems to detect them. At least one of the drones made it past Ukrainian defenses, hitting the navy's headquarters in Odessa on

Friday. Ukraine's southern military command said one civilian was killed and an administration building in the port area was destroyed.

Shahed-136 delta-wing drones, repainted in Russian colors and rebranded as Geranium 2, started appearing this month over Ukrainian armor and artillery positions in the northeastern Kharkiv region, Col. Rodion Kulagin, commander of artillery of Ukraine's 92nd Mechanized Brigade, told The Wall Street Journal.

In his brigade's operational area alone, the Iranian drones—which usually fly in pairs and then slam into their targets—have destroyed two 152mm self-propelled howitzers and two 122mm self-propelled howitzers, as well as two BTR armored infantry vehicles, Col. Kulagin said.



One recent development could potentially provide Ukraine with the air defense it needs to help combat the influx of Iranian suicide and attack drones. Reports coming from the Times of Israel dating back to September 12 and only now making their rounds on social media have revealed that an Israeli defense firm will provide Ukraine with counter-UAV systems.

While reports explain that the Israeli government isn't commenting on the delivery, the independent defense firm that makes the system is managing to execute the transfer by way of Poland. Through the sale of the unnamed system to Poland, the country was able to act as an intermediary to then transfer the defensive systems to Kyiv.

This news had come just days before Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky today expressed that he was "shocked" by the lack of support provided by Israel. (See article below under "Containment").

Russian commanders striking dams as they become increasingly concerned - Russian forces have attacked two dams in a bid to delay the advance of Ukrainian forces after becoming "increasingly concerned" by Kyiv's counteroffensive, according to U.K. defense officials.

In its daily report the British Ministry of Defence said the Pechenihiy dam in north-eastern Ukraine was struck twice, on September 21 and 22, as Ukrainian troops continue to attack after routing their Russian opponents around Kharkiv earlier this month.

Separately on September 15 the Karachunivske dam was reportedly hit in central Ukraine as Russia attempts to hold the city of Kherson just north of the Dnipro River.

Nuclear threat

Russia can defend new regions with nuclear weapons: Medvedev - Moscow does not fully control any of the four regions it is expected to try to annex, but that will not concern them.

Dmitry Medvedev, the former Russian president, has said that any weapons in Moscow's arsenal, including strategic nuclear weapons, could be used to defend territories incorporated into Russia from Ukraine.

Deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, he also said that referendums being organised by Russian-installed and separatist authorities in large swathes of occupied Ukrainian territory will take place, and that "there is no going back":

"The Donbas [Donetsk and Luhansk] republics and other territories will be accepted into Russia," he said in a Telegram post, referring to breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine's industrial heartland.

Referendum in four oblasts

Soldiers go door-to-door for votes in polls - Ukrainians have reported armed soldiers going door-to-door in occupied parts of the country to collect votes for self-styled "referendums" on joining Russia.

"You have to answer verbally, and the soldier marks the answer on the sheet and keeps it," one woman in Enerhodar told the BBC.

In southern Kherson, Russian guardsmen stood with a ballot box in the middle of the city to collect people's votes.

The door-to-door voting is for "security", Russian state media says. "In-person voting will take place exclusively on 27 September," Tass reported. "On the other days, voting will be organised in communities and in a door-to-door manner."

One woman in Melitopol told the BBC that two local "collaborators" arrived with two Russian soldiers at her parents' flat, to give them a ballot to sign. "My dad put 'no' [to joining Russia]," the woman said. "My mum stood nearby and asked what would happen for putting 'no'. They said, 'Nothing'.

"Mum is now worried that the Russians will persecute them."

The woman also said there was one ballot for the entire household, rather than per person.

Although the evidence is anecdotal, the presence of armed men conducting the vote contradicts Moscow's insistence that this is a free or fair process.

US President Biden vows 'swift and severe' costs if Russia annexes Ukraine regions in 'sham' referendums - US President Joe Biden on Friday warned Russia there will be "swift and severe" costs if Moscow uses

its "sham" referendums to annex more of Ukraine. "Russia's referenda are a sham – a false pretext to try to annex parts of Ukraine by force in flagrant violation of international law," Biden said in a statement. "We will work with our allies and partners to impose additional swift and severe economic costs on Russia."

"The United States will never recognize Ukrainian territory as anything other than part of Ukraine," he said.

Impacts

US issued private warnings to Russia against nuke weapons use & its consequences - The private communications of Washington to Moscow demonstrate the message that US President Joe Biden and his aides have spoken in public.

The US administration for several months has been issuing warnings to Russian leadership about "grave consequences" that would follow over use of nuclear weapons. The private communications of Washington to Moscow demonstrate the message that US President Joe Biden and his aides have spoken in public, The Washington Post reported citing US officials. The report about US administration's attempts to stop Russia from using nuclear weapons comes at a time when Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered partial mobilization in Russia and warned that Moscow will use "all the means" to defend its territory.

The Biden administration has deliberately decided to keep the warnings to Russia "vague" so that Kremlin remains concerned about how US will react. Officials revealed that the US State Department has been sending private communications with Russia without revealing who delivered the message and what was mentioned in the content, as per The Washington Post report. It was not known whether US sent any warning to Russia after Putin issued his veiled nuclear threat in a speech on Wednesday. However, a senior US official revealed that the communication from Washington to Russia has been taking place constantly over recent months. Earlier on September 21, Putin said that he has signed the decree for partial mobilization in Russia. He said that Russia will use "all the means" to protect its territory and asserted that "it's not a bluff." The Kremlin leader also accused West of engaging in "nuclear blackmail" against Russia.

Anxious about Russia's next move, Latvia prepares itself for war - Since Russian forces invaded Ukraine in February, Baltic states like Latvia are anxious about what Moscow might do next, leading to a four-fold increase in volunteers, for the army's reserve force known as the national guard, or Zemessardze in Latvian.

While Latvia's EU and NATO membership reassured her, Latvians feel under threat "because Russian aggression is unpredictable, and we don't know what can happen."

Created in 1991, the national guard is the largest component of armed forces in the country of 1.85 million people.

Made up of some 9,600 volunteers, it is divided into four brigades. The national army meanwhile has around 6,000 professional soldiers.

The guard's commander-in-chief Egils Lescinskis hailed the "great increase" in volunteer interest and said fewer people were dropping out.

Putin "feint" of heart?

With Russia's mobilization announcement earlier this week, questions are being asked about the move as well as propensities of success.

But let's look behind all this news, behind the geopolitical scenes.

Is Russia moving to occupy a seat at the table?

Are they upping the ante by strengthening their manpower position/s, albeit weakly in specialist analyses, threatening to lock down the occupied territories and stretch the conflict through the looming winter and into next year, and atop this, increasingly referring to defense through "any means at our disposal," loosely interpreted as tactical and full nuclear weaponry?

Are they positioning themselves to sit at the table, hopefully in their eyes, at the top of the table, and command a more powerful bargaining slate than is currently the case?

They know that winter is coming, that EU energy supplies are constricted, have announced a further 40% reduction in natural gas supply, that Italy looks headed to a far right-wing political upset in November this year and, the German ruling government coalition is weakening.

Put all these together, is Putin gambling on striking a geopolitical nerve, thinking western resolve will weaken over the next few months, and that some type of negotiation is around the corner?

He has just met with the SOC coalition, where both Modi of India and Xi of China expressed reservations about the war and conduct of the war.

The football World Cup is approaching, maybe some message has been delivered to Putin and he is reacting. His actions all appear "at the last moment," even the referendum roll out.

Putin's war, and his rule, are in trouble - Russia's mobilization of a reported 300,000 reservists hasn't proceeded very smoothly. Almost immediately after Putin announced the calling the reservists up for duty in Ukraine, waves of Russians began fleeing the country, rightly suspecting this was just the first wave of call-ups.

In Ukraine, by contrast, many men have returned home to serve when their country needed them, after the initial government order that barred Ukraine's fighting-age men from leaving the country as Russia invaded. In Finland, even NHL hockey stars return from America to do military service.

Any successful conscription or mobilization begins with respect for the citizens who are being turned into soldiers. Otherwise, they'll foil the military effort by not showing up or not doing their best—and in Russia's case dramatically demonstrating to the world that Putin's war, and his rule, is in trouble.

In his surprise address to the nation on Wednesday, Putin said, "I find it necessary to support the proposal of the Defense Ministry and the General Staff on partial mobilization in the Russian Federation to defend our motherland and its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to ensure the safety of our people and people in the liberated territories."

"Partial" meant the immediate call-up of some 300,000 reservists but reports already indicate the number could be far greater.

Social media is flooded with videos of tearful scenes as called-up men take their leave from their families, while other men ease their unexpected journey to the barracks by taking to the bottle. The news also prompted many others to swiftly drive to the border with visa-free Georgia or to book flights to Georgia and other countries not requiring visas for Russian citizens. Flights to Tbilisi, Belgrade, and Dubai are sold out for the next week or so, and after that they're exorbitantly expensive or moderately expensive with stopovers in places like Grozny.

It's hardly surprising that the men are escaping. War service is never pleasant. Putin's problem goes far beyond the ugliness of war. Russia's men are showing the world that Putin's "partial mobilization" demonstrates they don't believe in his war, and thus in his government. And it demonstrates that they don't believe the mobilization is partial at all.

They're extremely perceptive. Even though this week's announcement introduced partial mobilization, Russians can't be sure that it will remain so. "Until Wednesday 21 September they tried recruiting volunteers, and it didn't succeed. So they had to mobilize," Gudrun Persson, a Russia analyst at the Swedish Defence Research Agency and the lead author of the authoritative *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective*, told me. "And there's nothing that explains what 'partial' means, nor is it a term in current legislation. This is mobilization, full stop, for the third time in Russia's history. The previous times were 1914 and 1941."

Being part of the first mobilization since World War II doesn't bode well for the men now arriving in the barracks, and those who may be about to receive their call-up notice. "Until now, the problems Russian conscripts faced mostly involved *dedovshchina* (hazing), dying during exercises and poor, even if improving, service conditions," Katarzyna Zysk, an expert on the Russian military at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, told me. "Now, on top of that, there's a significant risk of becoming cannon fodder."

Ordinarily, ex-conscripts who are part of military reserves would not be sent to fight in foreign countries. But because the referendums conducted in Russian-held Ukrainian territories immediately after Putin's mobilization announcement mean those territories will soon count as Russia, they can be sent there too. "The Russian armed forces are trying to salvage whatever they can and prevent another Kharkiv, where soldiers and civilian representatives appear to have just turned around and fled," Persson explained.

Putin, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, and their advisers are painfully aware that few men want to serve in Russia's armed forces. For decades, young Russian men have used highly innovative ways (including PhD studies) to avoid being conscripted, and since the invasion of Ukraine the armed forces have faced such recruitment problems that many contract soldiers have simply seen their contracts extended involuntarily. "Since 2008, Russia has been trying to get away from its large mobilization armed forces, and instead create a professional force, mobile, with a lot of air power," Persson said, "And now they do this. This is like World War I, and they've not practiced for this contingency involving hundreds of thousands – and possibly more – rudimentarily trained ex-conscripts being sent to the war."

Shoigu has taken pains to emphasize that draftees will be placed in support roles rather than frontline combat, a logical message to send considering that at least 300,000 families would rebel if their sons were made immediate cannon fodder. But Russia's military seemed unprepared to receive even support troops. "The Russian armed forces' endemic corruption is becoming obvious once again," Persson said. "Soldiers are arriving at their bases and there are no uniforms for them, nothing. It's shocking."

Russia's mobilization debacle is playing out for all the world to see. And Putin is testing Russians' faith in his war and his regime. The men now being served call-up papers may not be politically minded, but their efforts to avoid becoming cannon fodder could turn the mobilization into a movement against Putin's war—and his regime.

Mobilization

Russian Jews flee to Israel - Israel is preparing for a possible influx of Russian Jews following the decision by Russian president Vladimir Putin to order a partial military mobilisation.

Immigration minister Pnina Tamano-Shata said demand is already rising.

"We see more requests from Russia to immigrate. I follow the community and the ministry is doing its best to make sure all those wishing to can arrive safely, despite challenges," she said.

Under Israel's Law of Return any Jew around the world has an automatic right to immigrate to Israel and the country prides itself on providing a safe haven for Jewish communities in distress.

“We will absorb as many new immigrants from Russia as possible. No matter how many arrive, we will look after them and have already begun trying to secure hotels for their first landing in our country,” Ms Tamano-Shata said.

In poor, rural Buryatia, Russia's partial mobilisation hits hard - In Buryatia, a mostly rural region wrapped around the southern shore of Lake Baikal, mobilization has seen men drafted regardless of their age, military record or medical history, according to interviews with local residents, rights activists and even statements by local officials.

Buryat rights activists suspect that the burden of the mobilisation - and the war itself - is falling on poor, ethnic minority regions to avoid triggering popular anger in the capital Moscow, which is 6,000km away.

Such was the outcry over the mobilisation in Buryatia, though, that Governor Alexei Tsydanov on Friday issued a statement clarifying that those who had not served in the army or who had medical exemptions would not be mobilized, though he admitted that some draft notices had been given to such men.

Escalation in Ukraine is a losing strategy - Earlier this spring, having effectively lost the battle for Kyiv, Putin switched to what he saw as the long game. To win, he wagered, he would merely have to wait until the West, facing spiking prices for energy and food, inflation, and unrest, softened its support, and Ukraine, exhausted by war and depleted of resources, gave up. Russia would emerge victorious in two campaigns at once: the subjugation of Ukraine and the dethroning of the Western-led security order.

It was possible for Putin to maintain faith in this vision for much of the summer, as Russia used its substantial artillery power to blast its way across the Donbas, in eastern Ukraine. The lines looked effectively frozen in other areas that Russia occupied, such as the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, buying Putin time for the status quo to take on the air of the inevitable. Russia wouldn't win by outright knockout, but through a kind of slow-motion T.K.O. in the months and years to come. The war—or “special military operation,” as it is known, in increasingly flimsy official parlance—could be fought on the cheap and dirty, using mercenaries, Kadyrovtsy from Chechnya, men rounded up from the streets of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, and prisoners who were promised pardons if they survive the front.

That plan came crashing down earlier this month, when a two-front Ukrainian counter-offensive, in the south and northeast, forced the Russian Army to abandon the entirety of the Kharkiv region, without much of a fight, in a matter of days. Across more than a thousand square miles, one line after another simply collapsed. According to a person familiar with Russian defense policy, the retreat from the Kharkiv region represented an “extremely serious operational loss for the Russian Army, which could turn into a strategic one.”

For months, this person told me, it had indeed looked as if the Ukrainian and Russian Armies suffered from the same problem: neither side had the strength to push forward and move the front strongly in one direction or another. But the Ukrainian military was constantly refreshed with new conscripts, and able to marshal significant deliveries of Western weapons—notably, the U.S.-made HIMARS rocket system, which is able to hit targets at around fifty miles. Ukraine began striking Russian ammunition depots, command posts, and logistics hubs far behind enemy lines, forcing the Russian Army to move its reserves even farther to the rear. “When their offensive started, we had nothing with which to sew up those holes,” this person told me, “and the Ukrainians went right through.”

On September 15th, the Biden Administration announced the latest U.S. arms package, which is worth up to six hundred million dollars and will include additional ammunition for HIMARS systems and artillery rounds. “Things were looking rather menacing, as if we were merely seeing the precursor to some further catastrophes,” the person familiar with Russian defense policy told me. “We are fighting alone, whereas Ukraine has many allies. And, as the fight goes on, we will have less and less modern weapons, but Ukraine will only receive more.”

At a certain point in the past two weeks, this reality must have dawned on Putin, who, like a gambler falling deeper into debt, set to overcome a losing run by doubling down.

Every part of his new strategy contains risks—and uncertain benefits. It is all but guaranteed that Ukraine, seven months into a war that it has considered existential since the very first day, will not be deterred by Russia's move to claim new territory. Even in the face of a nuclear threat, Ukrainian counter-offensives will likely continue apace.

Nor does it seem likely that the Biden Administration and other Western governments will suddenly call off their effort to arm and aid Ukraine simply because Putin suddenly says, for example, that the city of Kherson now belongs to Russia.

Even if the Kremlin manages to add several hundred thousand people to the roster of the armed forces, the Army will have to house and train them, a mammoth effort. In the best-case scenario, that will take months, by which time it may be too late to affect the trajectory of the war—not least because these new draftees will not be particularly motivated or trained in advanced modern weaponry. “If they had announced mobilization in March, by now they could have had, let's say, fifty thousand new troops prepared—but they didn't do that,” an analyst advised.

Mobilization will put the illusions of the Russian laymen under pressure, if it doesn't blow them apart entirely. That will be a process that happens over time, likely to take place on a personal rather than collective level. In other words, expect individual discontent, perhaps even sabotage, but not yet a revolution. “For a Russian person with no experience with collective action, the instinctual reaction at the first appearance of any threat is to hide, save himself, bury his head in the sand,” the analyst said. That was the period from the invasion until now. “And if something even worse happens? Well, then bury your head even deeper.”

But even this process has its limits, especially if Russia's mobilization proves to be more far-reaching than the “limited” nature which Putin announced. In a harrowing piece, Andrew Roth, at the Guardian, described the first day of the draft: “Summons delivered to eligible men at midnight. Schoolteachers pressed into handing out draft notices. Men given an hour to pack their things and appear at draft centres. Women sobbing as they sent their husbands and sons off to fight in Russia's war in Ukraine.”

The new conscription policy has exposed a fundamental contradiction for Putin, who, historically, has relied on a certain brand of civic demobilization, in which citizens are meant to be apathetic, disengaged, and inert, with little demanded or expected of them other than the most passive forms of nominal loyalty. Now, suddenly, Russians are being asked to sacrifice their lives for a cause that was never even properly explained to them.

“Logically, in order to work, military mobilization should have followed political mobilization,” Yudin said. “Frankly, you need something like real fascism.” But, so far, Putinism has only managed to offer a surface-level simulacrum—warmongers call for blood on state television, but virtually no one flocks to stadia of their own accord for pro-war rallies. The Kremlin seems to have rather quickly given up on trying to bring society to a militarized boil. And so, as Yudin put it, “This all feels now like a club to the head: ‘What is this about? I didn't bother you, you didn't bother me, and now I should go to the Army and die for what?’ ” The demobilization-mobilization paradox, Yudin said, “has reached its limit.”

Russian military eyes central Asian recruits amid mobilization drive - Central Asian migrants are accustomed to doing Moscow's dirty work.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of citizens from the countries of the region travel to the Russian capital and other major cities to take jobs as street sweepers, cleaners, construction workers, and on the front lines of the service sector -- employment Russians often shun.

Now it is Russia's military front in Ukraine that may be looming, with legal amendments passed by the State Duma offering a "simplified" fast track to Russian citizenship in return for a year of military service "in the armed forces of the Russian Federation, other forces, or military formations."

The context for changes in the legislation on receiving Russian citizenship came a day later, on September 21, when President Vladimir Putin announced a partial military mobilization to bolster the Kremlin's unprovoked invasion, after results on the battlefield took a turn for the worse.

The announcement and a vaguely worded presidential decree accompanying it has sparked panic, not to mention a surge in demand for flights out of Russia not seen since the first weeks of the war.

By the end of the day, more than 1,300 people had been detained at protests in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and more than 30 other cities, where many participants held up posters with the blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag and chanted "No to mobilization!" and "Russia without Putin."

Online, the mobilization drive is being referred to as "mogilizatsia," a play on the Russian word for a grave.

With the prospect of recruitment drives especially unpopular in cities like Moscow, it is not surprising that a disproportionately large part of the fighting has fallen on soldiers from what migration researcher Yan Matusевич calls "the poorest and [most] remote regions of the country, many of which happen to be populated by non-Russian ethnic minorities."

The turn toward migrants should be seen as part of this trend, Matusевич told RFE/RL, offering the opportunity to "boost recruitment numbers of the big cities without having to draft more well-off Russians from [Moscow and St. Petersburg]," that the decree does not appear to safeguard from the mobilization.

Moscow's city government, led by Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, has wasted little time in rolling out the recruitment mat.

The overwhelming majority of the migrants from Central Asia are from three countries: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, circled to the right.

Other CIS countries tend to send fewer citizens there in or have economies that are less sourced cash transfers.

All three are known for their political loyalty toward Russia, but perhaps mindful of the international sanctions against Russia and its closest ally, Belarus, they have instructed nationals that prison sentences await anyone violating laws on participating in foreign wars.



Hundreds more arrested this morning as Russian draft protests continue - Hundreds of people have been arrested by authorities as protests against Russia's new "partial mobilisation" continue across the country, an independent rights group has said.

OVD-Info said 724 people were detained across 32 different cities on Saturday.

Widespread demonstrations have broken out since President Vladimir Putin announced plans to draft 300,000 men to fight in Ukraine. Unsanctioned rallies are banned under Russian law.

Chinese Coup?

There are, since late last night, increasing unsubstantiated reports of President Xi Jinping being under house arrest and the PLA moving into Beijing to secure the city and military command, and is one of the top trending topics on Twitter.

Upon checking I am confidentially told it is “fake news,” that the Chinese government has tracked the source to an Indian Internet news site, replicated by other Indian web news agencies and picked up in the US for further reporting.

Let’s wait and see, but I tend to follow my source.

Sanctions

US warns China against aiding Russia - Secretary of State Blinken yesterday warned Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi against Beijing providing any support to Russia related to its invasion of Ukraine, during a meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

China maintains close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin but has held back from explicitly endorsing the invasion and has avoided carrying out actions that would directly position itself as violating US-led global sanctions on Russia.

US and allies join forces on semiconductor supply to stop China's advancement - The world's major chip-producing nations, including the United States, are joining together in part to secure their supply chains for semiconductors and prevent China from overtaking them as the market leader.

Countries with robust semiconductor industries, like the US, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, have attempted to form alliances around crucial technology.

Putin

The weakness of the strongman - Ever since the brilliant Ukrainian counteroffensive that liberated much of Kharkiv Oblast in mid-September forcing Russian troops into a panicked retreat, Russia watchers have been waiting for Putin’s response. It came on Wednesday morning when he announced a “partial military mobilization”—a call-up of military reservists—and endorsed rapid moves to annex four regions of Ukraine, including the “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk, via referendums on unification with Russia.

Obviously, this is an escalation. But toward what, and how could it play out? Drawing especially on Russian sources, let’s review the record of the last few days and see where the smart analysis now stands.

As Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to President Zelensky, pointed out on Twitter, the “partial mobilization” Putin announced is a pretty clear admission that Russia’s “special operation” is not going according to plan.

At least in part, mobilization was a way for Putin to save face.

Can it turn things around in Russia’s favor? Unlikely.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has said that about 300,000 reservists—people who have completed a term of military service with an age cutoff of 35 for soldiers and noncommissioned officers, and of 50 for officers—will be called up, mostly ones with relevant experience or specialties. If this target is met, it would certainly shore up Russian manpower in Ukraine—eventually. (The current size of the invasion force has been estimated at 170,000 to 200,000; presumably, many of those soldiers will be rotated out when the draftees arrive.) But that’s a big if, judging by the fact Russians are already fleeing by the planeload across the border ahead of an anticipated ban on travel abroad.

Expatriate Russian lawyer Mark Feygin suggested in an interview this week that many Russian governors, who have been tasked with organizing mobilization in their regions, are likely to quietly sabotage the process—that is, to drag their feet on enforcing the unpopular order and then blame their failure on draft evaders. Meanwhile, the soldiers who do get drafted are likely to arrive in Ukraine poorly trained and no less poorly equipped. As for morale, the fact that they're being drafted to fight in a foreign war none of them cared about enough to volunteer for says a great deal.

Another telling fact: The day before Putin's announcement, the State Duma rapidly passed a bill which not only toughened the penalties for various offenses related to military service—such as insubordination and absence without leave—if they are committed during a mobilization or in wartime but created two brand-new offenses: “refusal to participate in combat operations” and “voluntary surrender.”

The first is clear enough; the second, military lawyer Maxim Grebenyuk told *Novaya Gazeta*, makes it a crime to be captured unless you're physically incapacitated or taken by surprise in an ambush. If a Russian soldier lays down his arms when surrounded and facing certain death, Russian law now treats him as a criminal, and he faces up to ten years of imprisonment if he eventually goes home. This law has distinct and sinister Stalinist overtones, evoking the days of World War II when the Soviet Union regarded its captured soldiers as traitors and prisoners repatriated after the end of the war were often sent to the gulag.

Meanwhile, the strange circumstances surrounding Putin's televised speech—originally announced as a live primetime address on Tuesday, then delayed and finally postponed until Wednesday morning when it was shown pre-recorded—have heightened suspicions that all is not well behind Kremlin walls. Was the Russian president panicking? Were there tensions between the “war party” and more moderate elements? Were things in disarray? “People who can't organize a speech on TV want to organize an offensive in the field,” quipped Arestovych.

There is no question “partial mobilization” will have a major disruptive effect on Russian society. Writing in *Novaya Gazeta*, political scientist Mikhail Komin points out that it drastically changes the tacit “social contract” between Putin and the Russian populace under which people stayed out of politics and allowed the elites to enrich themselves while, in return, the state allowed them a reasonably decent standard of living and mostly left them alone.

Now, says Komin, “the machinery of the state has invaded your home and intends to take your son, brother or husband for its own purposes—and this can happen to anyone who is not a part of the elite.” Or, as political satirist Viktor Shenderovich put it, “War has come from the TV screen to the couch of the man watching TV—and the man wasn't ready for it.”

Whatever effect mobilization ultimately has on the situation in Ukraine, it has greater potential than anything thus far to motivate the Russian people to express their displeasure with Putin's ugly, botched war of choice.

Is this, as dissident Russian punditry almost unanimously claims, the beginning of the end for Putin, a harbinger of imminent doom? Such predictions inevitably have an element of wishful thinking. But today, the possibility that we are watching Putin's reenactment of *Downfall* looks more credible than ever. (The Bulwark).

Is Putin's war actually unpopular in Russia? - Earlier today, both Sputnik and Russia Today (RT) reported that over fifty thousand Russians held a rally in Moscow, in support of Referendum in the disputed regions of Donbass, and others. In the same vein the BBC, CNN and others based their report on the large number of persons fleeing Putin's conscription policy as a result of the Russian-Ukraine crises. A major emphasis in the reporting of these events is the careful use of language by both sides of the divide, and appropriately constructed sentence usage.

Nominally, for every singular Political action, there exists grounds of support, platforms of outright rejection and hostility to the Political action taken, as well as grounds for indifference. In the case of Putin, it seemed quite a perspective that all these grounds merges into one but at the same time taking varying points.

It may be hard to pinpoint that there is a gross dissatisfaction amongst Russians over the very fact of the war in Ukraine, in fact that dissatisfaction takes different forms;

- Firstly there are those whose dissatisfaction is with the duration of time Russian military action has taken rather than the fact that Russia took a military action.
- Secondly, there is the dissatisfaction from the group who have felt that the Russian withdrawal from large areas of Ukraine, into just a consolidation on Eastern Ukraine was an unnecessary show of weakness.
- Thirdly there are the group who are dissatisfied with the very action of military involvement in a crisis rather than Political solutions; technically not because they take the side of Ukraine or the West, but because they have a distaste for military offensives and the loss of lives resulting from it.

The above three indicate that Putin's support base remains Russian Nationalists, who revel in the glory of an acclaimed good-old-days, 'the era of the USSR.'

But on the contrary there is that strong opposition for everything Putin stands for within necessary layers of the Russian federation whose voices not only go unheard of, but who also lacks the Political standing to oppose Putin's agenda. For these distraught individuals, lacking political power, fleeing the Russian federation as an only alternative.

Putin's appeal in his most recent speech was to that Nationalist sentiment, technically his appeal was to his base, and inasmuch as that base keep being fed with the reality of a collective enemy which is after the 'Russian spirit,' as well as being show areas of Russian strength, further reinforced by seeming wins and victories by the Russian side, no price would seem too high to pay in protecting the Russian motherland.

Technically, it becomes difficult to pinpoint what the outcome of the conflict would be, but it remains a lot more visibly obvious that there are large layers of pro-Russian sentiments in Eastern Ukraine as much as there are heavy pro-Ukrainian sentiments all over Ukraine and even in the West. However Putin's aim undeniably, isn't an appeal to those whom he may dismiss as internal dissidents, or external antagonists, rather it is to his support base, and the Nationalistic elements of Russian society.

Placating Iran, pacifying Africa and antagonizing Israel; Putin's 'new face' for Russia - With Ukraine's invasion now in its fifth month, Russia's narrative hasn't changed, but it's approach to passing this narrative seems to have obviously altered over the past weeks.

From a hardline stance, to accepting some forms of compromise, Russia's newest gambit exudes a desire to secure alliances from a neutral African, an anti-west Iran and force a change of policy in Israel. But the real details of this gambit isn't different from the familiar narratives the Russian federation have pushed over time. However, presently the focus of Russia's diplomatic effort seem to be a desire to take away emphasis from the ongoing war and consolidate on points of synergy and 'if possible' certain anti-west sentiments in furthering these aims.

- **Iran** - For Iran, it has been obvious that the conflict surrounding Iran's nuclear ambition has remained a sour spot in her interactions with the West. While prior to this time Russia has attempted to be partly aloof in the Western antagonisms and sanctions on Iran as a result of her nuclear program, it isn't insulated from a nuclear-powered Iran. While on the one hand Russia doesn't want a Nuclearized Iran, on the other hand elements of desperation can be seen on the part of Russia.

With the obvious International pariah status, and sanctions on all sides, it may only be plausible that Russia's ambition now isn't on whether or not Iran has a nuclear program, but whether or not a support from Iran can become a threat; formidable enough to force the West into reconsidering its positions and at least come to the negotiation table as regards Ukraine.

Thus one can easily see Russia's ambition in relating with Iran has little or nothing to do with her stance on Iran's nuclear program, but rather everything to do with a desire to fight back international isolation stemming from the Ukraine's war. How exactly Putin attempts to balance the threat of Iran's nuclear program with Russia's present desire for what may be termed an 'International rescue alliance for Russia' remains to be seen. But then in the same vein an important question remains if Russia's move towards Iran doesn't also have something to do with the State of Israel.

- **Africa** all the while has maintained a neutral status in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. President Zelensky has reached out to the continent through her apex body the African Union in a bid to address leaders of the continent, but this hasn't been met with the kind of success anticipated.

While tacitly certain African states like Nigeria, amongst others have issued veiled criticism at Russia's invasion, the continent is obviously torn between pro-Ukrainian sentiments and some levels of anti-western ideology evident in certain layers of her dealings, most of which stems from the anger over European colonialism less than a century ago; which of course remain fresh in African memory.

Furthermore there's the push for decolonization which has remained paramount both in African Academic scholarship as well as her Political landscape, and this is the point of promise the Russian foreign minister made to the Egyptian government on his visit to Egypt. Pushing the narrative away from Russia's aggressiveness in Ukraine, Sergey Lavrov presented the Russian federation as being a victim of Western imperialist desire. His veiled reference for corporation from Africa is based on a promise to help Africa in her fight for decolonization.

But one may immediately point out that Lavrov picked a wrong talking point. Visibly it could have been much productive if he had stuck with presenting a posture of Russia being a victim of Western imperialistic ambition, and thus linking it to Africa's colonial past. However the very point of helping Africa fight decolonization is one which immediately portrays a lack of understanding of Africa's decolonization fight.

Fundamentally, the centerpiece of Africa's quest for decolonization is based on a rejection of all forms of non-African interference and dominance in Economic, Social and Political processes of Africa. Thus it becomes absurd to think that the African continent would attempt to seek Eastern help in her internal fight against the existing vestiges of Western colonialism, seeing that Russia is in herself capable of exhibiting same overt influence in Africa's Economic and Political process if given the chance.

Israel - Despite these diplomatic smart moves by the Russian federation, her seeming hardline posture towards Israel cannot be explained away as being unsound. Russia understands the International posture of Israel, and her strong alliance with Western powers, hence seeking any form of support from Israel would seem not only unthinkable but also unrealizable.

Thus the Russian scheme of things with Israel seems geared towards exploiting Israel's international challenges with Iran and Syrian into forcing a policy change within the Israeli government. This approach has remained on display since the start of the Ukraine conflict. Zelensky is Jewish and there is a strong Jewish community in Ukraine; a large chunk of which have been evacuated, thus it remains very logical that Russia should remain skeptical about what forms of tacit support Israel may offer to Ukraine even though she has openly tolled line of neutrality.

In this regards, one can see the subtle implications of Russia's warming up with Iran as being a grounding to exploit courting a country who has remained a sworn enemy to Jews worldwide. And at the same time, coupled with Russia's presence in Syria, it seems much plausible that Russia's hidden message is twain; the first of which is to present a threat to the West of granting a covering to Iran, and as such heightening the fear over how fast Iran could go on to acquire the ultimate weapon. On the second hand Russia's ploy also seem to present to Israel the possibility that her present neutrality may just lead to Russia's shielding of Iranian proxies in Syria, which of course

would raise serious concerns as regards Israel's security. In a much similar vein the current diplomatic row between Israel and Russia as regards the threat of shutting down the Jewish agency also present Russia's ultimate posturing as one geared towards forcing Israel to totally hands off any form of tacit support for Ukraine and if possible even rethink her support for other Western causes.

Containment

Zelensky says he's 'shocked' by lack of Israeli arms support: 'They gave us nothing' - Ukrainian president Zelensky complained in an interview Friday that Israel had given his country "nothing" to help it defend itself, indicating that its leaders had been disingenuous in rejecting his requests for air defense systems.

"Israel gave us nothing. Nothing, zero," Zelensky told France's TV5Monde. "I understand they are in a difficult situation with Syria, with Russia."

Though it has sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine, Israel has repeatedly rebuffed Kyiv's requests for defense weapons, specifically missile defense systems that could be used to fend off Russian airstrikes, despite expressing sympathy for the country's plight.

Zelensky, who said he spoke to Prime Minister Yair Lapid and his predecessor Naftali Bennett about air defense supplies, indicated that he was told the reason for the refusal was that Israel needed the batteries for its own protection.

"I understand they need to defend their land, but then I got information from my intelligence services that Israel provides [the air defenses] in other countries. They can sell, they can export, which is why I am shocked."

Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, expressed surprise in the French interview at Israel's position, given the links between the two countries.

"You know there are many people in Ukraine of Jewish origin, and there are a lot of Ukrainians in Israel. How is it possible to have this attitude? I was shocked," he said.

GeoPolitical

World opinion shifts against Russia as Ukraine worries grow - The tide of international opinion appears to be decisively shifting against Russia, as a number of non-aligned countries are joining the United States and its allies in condemning Moscow's war in Ukraine and its threats to the principles of the international rules-based order.

Western officials have repeatedly said that Russia has become isolated since invading Ukraine in February. Until recently, though, that was largely wishful thinking. But on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, much of the international community spoke out against the conflict in a rare display of unity at the often-fractured United Nations.

The tide had already appeared to be turning against Putin even before Thursday's U.N. speeches. Chinese and Indian leaders had been critical of the war at a high-level summit last week in Uzbekistan. And then the U.N. General Assembly disregarded Russia's objections and voted overwhelmingly to allow Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to be the only leader to address the body remotely, instead of requiring him to appear in person.

That shift against Russia accelerated after Putin on Wednesday announced the mobilization of some additional 300,000 troops to Ukraine, signaling the unlikelihood of a quick end to the war. Putin also suggested that nuclear weapons may be an option. That followed an announcement of Russia's intention to hold independence referenda in several occupied Ukrainian regions with an eye toward possible annexation.

Numerous world leaders used their speeches on Tuesday and Wednesday to denounce Russia's war. That trend continued Thursday both in the assembly hall and at the usually deeply divided U.N. Security Council, where, one by one, virtually all of the 15 council members served up harsh criticism of Russia—a council member—for aggravating several already severe global crises and imperiling the foundations of the world body.

The apparent shift in opinion offers some hope to Ukraine and its Western allies that increasing isolation will add pressure on Putin to negotiate a peace. But few are unduly optimistic. Putin has staked his legacy on the Ukraine war, and few expect him to back down. And Russia is hardly isolated. Many of its allies depend on it for energy, food and military assistance and are likely to stand by Putin regardless of what happens in Ukraine.

Still, it was striking to hear Russia's nominal friends like China and India, following up on last week's remarks, speak of grave concerns they have about the conflict and its impact on global food and energy shortages as well as threats to the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity that are enshrined in the U.N. Charter.

Brazil registered similar concerns. Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa make up the so-called BRICS bloc of countries, which has often shunned or outright opposed Western initiatives and views on international relations.

As Russia expands its war in Ukraine, will the delicate peace in the Balkans be disrupted? - Concern is growing over Russian influence, as tensions rise in the region.

The day before Putin ordered the mobilization, he took time from his day for an unusual visit.

Separatist leader Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's three-person presidency, became one of few European politicians to break Putin's isolation by visiting the Kremlin on Tuesday.

The trip was all the more unusual as Dodik is in the midst of an election campaign for leadership of Bosnia's ethnic Serbian enclave, Republika Srpska, which he has repeatedly threatened to take out of its union with Bosnia's other ethnic groups.

Smiling and shaking hands for the state press, Putin wished Dodik success in the campaign. "I hope that the results will strengthen the position of the patriotic forces in the country," an official transcript of the conversation reads.

It's revealing that Putin took time in the midst of a historic mobilization to boost the campaign of a politician elected in 2018 with fewer than 400,000 votes.

Dodik and his power base of Serb nationalists are at the centre of a long-running power game that Russia and the West have been playing in the Western Balkans for decades.

Now, with ethnic tensions rising, some analysts are worried Russia will seek to use its influence with figures like Dodik to disrupt the delicate peace that has held in the region since the devastating Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s.

"The situation has changed dramatically" since Russia invaded Ukraine in February, said Lirim Bllaca, a former captain in the Kosovo armed forces and a security consultant for the Kosovo government. "There's been more attempts by Russia to instigate conflict in the Balkans."

"Having closer ties and influence, that's always been Putin's goal," said Andi Hoxhaj, a lecturer in international law at University College London and an expert on the Western Balkans, which encompasses Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

But "in parts where he cannot achieve it," Hoxhaj said, "Putin will destabilize it."

Russia's influence in the Balkans is nothing new. Since Serbia first fought for independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century with Russia's support, it has been a key ally of ethnic Serbs in the region.

But with NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in the late 1990s and its recognition of Kosovo's independence from Serbia in 2008, many Serb nationalists adopted a hostile attitude toward Western powers and instead emphasized their historic connection to Russia.

Throughout the 2010s, it delivered on its reputation, exerting its influence on the United Nations Security Council to stymie Kosovo's bid for international recognition and advocating for Serb autonomy in Bosnia.

Blocking Western influence

Experts say Russia's influence campaign in the Western Balkans accelerated after its 2014 invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, when it began to act aggressively to check the advance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization across eastern Europe.

Recently declassified intelligence from the U.S. State Department alleges Russia spent nearly \$300 million US since 2014 influencing foreign politicians, naming Albania and Montenegro among its targets.

In 2017, Montenegro's government even accused Russia of orchestrating a plot to assassinate a former prime minister and stage a coup to prevent the country from joining NATO. It became a member in June of that year.

One year later, Russian diplomats were implicated in efforts to bribe Orthodox priests in Greece to speak against an agreement with North Macedonia that would pave the way for the latter's membership in NATO.

Balance of power

The goal of this disruption, analysts say, is to keep the West on alert for renewed conflict in the Balkans and prevent Western powers from exerting greater influence.

"Russia has long resisted the United States and Europe's engagement with countries in the former Soviet space," Stronski said. "Russia, by engaging in the Balkans, is sort of doing the opposite — it is trying to engage in what it considers Europe's backyard."

Russia's capability for mischief 'limited'

Yet the EU has been slow to capitalize on its own influence. Membership talks have been stalled in many Balkan countries for years.

When the EU granted Ukraine candidate status this summer in response to Russia's invasion, while imposing more conditions on Bosnia, many in the region saw it as unjust, according to Rajic.

"If you ask me, that decision from Brussels has created much more instability in the region than Russian influence ever has," he said.

Lirim Bllaca, the Kosovar army captain, said that as the influence of pro-EU politicians wanes, a new wave of "right-wing sentiment" is filling the vacuum.

"When the war in Ukraine started, you could feel it," he said, particularly in Kosovo's Serb communities, where many are veterans of past wars. "I think we all had flashbacks of the last conflict."

But Bllaca and other analysts are in agreement that for now, open conflict remains unlikely.

With its resources tied up in Ukraine, "Russia's capability for mischief is, at this moment in time, limited," Vuksanovic said.

While there "is no doubt that Russia will try to score a few political points in any political chaos," he said, ethnic leaders like Dodik have so far been able to maintain their grip on power without resorting to violence.

"There are certainly more problems in the Balkans than 10 years ago," Vuksanovic said. "But it is still better to be in Belgrade or Sarajevo rather than in Kharkiv or Odesa."

EC president backs Irish call to suspend Russia from UN Security Council - Charles Michel told the UN General Assembly yesterday that Russia should be suspended from the UN Security Council for going to war in Ukraine.

The European Council president has backed Taoiseach Micheál Martin's statement that Russia's permanent place on the United Nations Security Council must be questioned because of its invasion of Ukraine.

Charles Michel told the UN General Assembly yesterday that Russia should be suspended from the UN Security Council for going to war in Ukraine.

GeoMilitary

Inching away from Russia - The countries of Central Asia appear to see the writing on the wall, inching away from Russia even as they move closer to China. Kazakhstan, which accepted the help of Russian troops in quelling a January uprising, curtly refused to assist Putin in Ukraine and has even joined the international sanctions against Russia. In one of the clearest signs of Russian decline yet, Xi further promised to support Kazakh "sovereignty."

Most notably, the past week may have seen the death knell for the 30-year-old, Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO. Its members are theoretically obliged to come to the defense of any member under attack but has seen member state Armenia attacked without any CSTO response.

In the very same week, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both CSTO members, began fighting with one another, with Russia impotently looking on. Meanwhile, China is increasingly willing to replace Russia as a security guarantor; Xi pledged that China would train 2,000 personnel to fight "color revolutions" in SCO countries, mostly likely in reference to Kazakhstan's near-revolution in January.

Turkey stands with Ukraine in the War: Kalin - Turkey stands with Ukraine in the war and will defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty, President Erdogan's Spokesman İbrahim Kalın said, Bloomberg reports.

The country won't recognize the result of Russia's referendums to annex occupied Ukrainian territories, Kalın said in an interview with NTV channel late Friday. Still, Turkey has sought to mediate in the conflict, maintaining good ties with both Russia and Ukraine and refraining from joining Western sanctions against Moscow.

"Turkey is the only country that makes an effort to end the war," Kalın said in the interview.