

Conflict Update # 43

April 28th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Attacks within Russia – Increasing reports are being received of sabotage and missile attacks within Russia itself, with ammunition and supply dumps being targeted. Ukraine has remained silent on these attacks whilst Russian reports blame Ukraine.

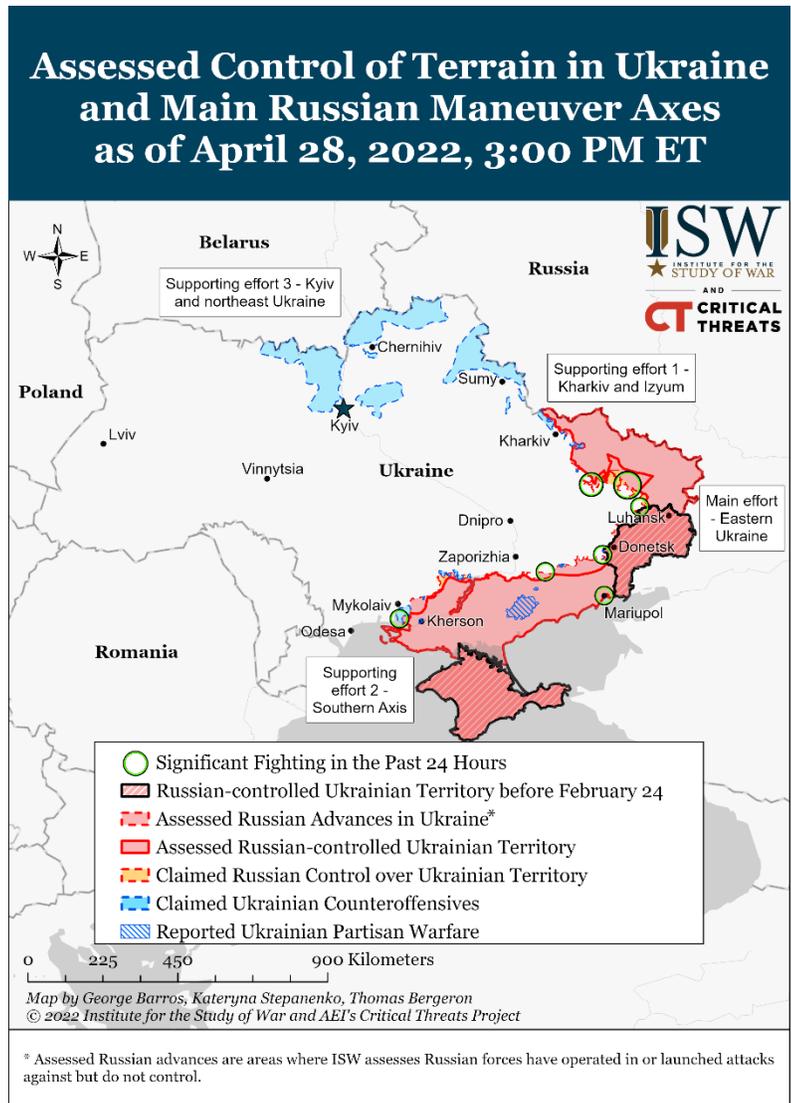
Main effort—Eastern Ukraine

Subordinate Main Effort—Mariupol - Russian forces today increased the tempo of artillery and airstrikes against Ukrainian positions in the Azovstal facility and directly targeted a Ukrainian field hospital. Mariupol's City Council and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that seven Russian Tu-22 strategic bombers struck the hospital with multi-ton "bunker-buster" bombs. ISW cannot independently confirm this report, though Russian forces have targeted Ukrainian medical facilities and hospitals throughout the war. Azov Regiment Commander Captain Svyatoslav Palamar appealed to Kyiv "to take decisive action" against Russian forces, and Ukrainian defenders are likely running low on supplies.

Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts - Russian forces today continued tactical ground attacks and shelling along the entire line of contact in eastern Ukraine but did not secure any major advances.

Concentrated use of artillery by Russian forces in eastern Ukraine in April is one of the few major changes Russia has made to its operations compared to the early weeks of the war. Their forces conducted a (failed) attack on Rubizhne today but largely shelled Ukrainian positions in the Severodonetsk region without conducting ground attacks. Ukrainian General Staff reported that enemy forces concentrated on improving their tactical positions and preparing for offensive operations towards Lyman, 55 km west of Rubizhne, and conducted several assaults west of Donetsk, attempting to advance on Solodke, Novomykhailivka, and Marinka; and Russian forces attempted to advance north of Mariupol in the area of Neskuchne and Vremivka.

Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv and Izyum - Ukrainian forces repelled continued assaults west of Izyum toward Velyka Komushevkha and southwest on the road to Barvinkove. Russian forces launched assaults on Velyka Komushevkha (likely seeking to capture the south before pivoting south) and Nova Dmytrivka (on the direct road to Barvinkove). But their forces have made little progress in attacks directly southeast toward Slovyansk and will likely



seek to bypass Ukrainian defenses by attacking further west. Ukrainian forces conducted a limited counterattack directly northwest of Kharkiv city on April 28, recapturing the town of Kutuzivka.

Supporting Effort #2—Southern Axis - Russian forces conducted several locally successful attacks from Kherson toward Mykolaiv today. They have captured the outskirts of Tavriyske and conducted assaults on the nearby settlements of Nova Zorya and Oleksandrivka, on the route to Mykolaiv. Their forces likely intend to capture the western border of Kherson Oblast and threaten Mykolaiv but are unlikely to be able to renew assaults on the city itself in the near future. Ukrainian forces repelled attacks north towards Kryvyi Rih in the past 24 hours.

Supporting Effort #2 - Transnistria - Russian and proxy forces continued to mobilize in Transnistria. The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Transnistria is preparing to fully staff its military units and increase their readiness. Ukraine's Operational Command "South" reported on April 27-28 that Russia is "systematically" conducting provocations in Transnistria and creating the false threat of an attack from Ukraine. Transnistrian President Vadim Krasnoselsky today ordered Transnistria's Ministry of Internal Affairs to "be ready for any scenario", but (likely falsely) denied Moldovan government reports that Transnistrian authorities are preventing men of fighting age from leaving the region.

Supporting Effort #3—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine - Ukraine's Border Guard Service reported Russian forces fired at border checkpoints in Chernihiv and Sumy Oblasts on April 27-28 but did not inflict any casualties. Ukrainian General Staff continued to report that Russian forces are highly unlikely to attempt a new offensive in northeastern Ukraine but are reinforcing the Russian border and are trying to fix Ukrainian reserves in place to prevent their redeployment to eastern Ukraine.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces attacking southeast from Izyum, west from Kreminna and Popasna, and north from Donetsk City will likely make steady but purely tactical gains against Ukrainian defenders.
- Russian forces will likely attempt to starve out the remaining defenders of the Azovstal Steel Plant in Mariupol and will not allow trapped civilians to evacuate but may conduct costly assaults on the remaining Ukrainian defenders to claim a propaganda victory.
- Russian forces are likely preparing to conduct renewed offensive operations to capture the entirety of Kherson Oblast in the coming days.
- Russia may continue false-flag attacks in and around Transnistria or move to generate a more serious crisis in Transnistria and Moldova more generally.

Sanctions

Russia Oil Output to Drop to Lowest Level in 18 Years - Russia's oil production is on track to drop to an 18-year low this year as Western sanctions and departing foreign oil companies complicate extraction and reduce demand.

Finance Minister Anton Siluanov told reporters Wednesday that Russian oil output could decline 17% this year.

Once bound by trade, China-EU honeymoon sours over Ukraine war - China and Europe may not be in a cold war, but bilateral relations are increasingly chilly. China's failure to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, considered an existential threat to European security, is the latest and gravest in a series of challenges by Beijing to the rules-based order on which the European Union professes to operate.

Reflecting a bilateral relationship centred on economics, Europe has often taken disagreements with its top trading partner China in stride.

However, China's support for Russia – rooted in Chinese leader Xi Jinping's close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin – has altered European calculations.

"Beijing is so blinded by wanting Europe to be 'strategically autonomous' from the US that it prevents it from understanding the security infrastructure in Europe," Sari Arho Havrén, a European-China policy analyst at the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin, told Al Jazeera.

The economic war against Russia is getting hot - Markets have stabilized following Russia's Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine, as if the bombs and missiles won't derail the global economy. But the economic war running parallel to the shooting war is getting hotter, warranting more attention than investors may be devoting.

Much of the analysis of Russia's war in Ukraine focuses on brutal land battles for terrain as invading and defending forces fight village-by-village in eastern and southern Ukraine. But just as important are multinational efforts to choke the Russian economy, by slashing the energy revenue that funds Russia's military and denying foreign technology Russia needs to maintain and replenish its weaponry. Like tank and artillery battles, the economic combat is attrition warfare in which whoever lasts longest is likely to win.

The economic war is intensifying as the improbable starts to seem possible: Ukraine could win. President Biden plans to ask Congress for \$33 billion in fresh aid to Ukraine, including \$20 billion for weapons. That would be a huge, 10-fold increase in what Washington has provided so far. The usually taciturn U.S. Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, has started to talk about the U.S. and NATO deliberately weakening Russia, en route to a Ukrainian victory. Heavy weapons, such as tanks and artillery, that Ukraine's allies were reluctant to provide at the start of the war could soon be flooding into Ukraine.

Canada pushing G7 on new laws to seize and repurpose frozen Russian assets - The federal Canadian government is working with G7 allies to craft new legislation that would allow for not just the freezing of sanctioned Russian assets but seizing them on behalf of Ukrainian war victims.

The recent federal budget declared Canada's intention to pursue the seizure-of-assets route, which has been the subject of a bill by an Independent senator that is on the verge of being passed in the Senate.

Nuclear

UK warns Putin he will be 'outgunned and outnumbered' after chilling nuclear hint - Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said he wasn't 'rattled' by Putin's threats - and warned Britain has nuclear-armed submarines 'deep underwater, hiding, waiting, in case Britain needs to be protected'

NATO forces "outnumber and outgun" Russia, the UK Defense Secretary said today after Vladimir Putin issued his latest chilling nuclear hint.

Ben Wallace warned the crews of Britain's nuclear weapon-armed submarines were "deep underwater, hiding, waiting, in case Britain needs to be protected."

Russia's President yesterday warned he would mount a "lightning-fast" retaliation if the west intervened in Ukraine, warning "we have all the tools" and "we will use them if necessary."

But Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said "I don't think [Putin] will" use nuclear weapons.

The top Tory said Russia's President has committed "massive strategic blunders," noting drily: "His so-called lightning invasion of Ukraine hasn't gone too well."

In February Putin ordered Russia's nuclear weapons to be put on high alert and he has made several hints since about the country's nuclear arsenal.

Top Kremlin Mouthpiece Says Russia Has No Choice but to Use Nuclear Weapons - Western support for Ukraine military ops inside Russia will leave the Kremlin with no choice but the nuclear "annihilation" of its neighbour, says one of Putin's top propagandists.

The warning from Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the propaganda outlets RT and Sputnik, came after further Ukrainian strikes overnight on the border city of Belgorod, a key supply center for Russian military forces in eastern Ukraine.

"Explosions and air defense sirens in Belgorod," Simonyan wrote early Thursday in a message on Telegram. "The Anglo-Saxons publicly encourage Ukraine to take their hostilities into Russian territory. And they give them means to carry that plan out.

"What choice do you leave us, idiots? The total annihilation of what remains of Ukraine. A nuclear strike?"

In Putinist circles the term "Anglo-Saxons" can be used as a bit of a catch-all for malign Western influences, but there appeared to be little doubt that Simonyan's message was referring to Britain.

British defense minister James Heappey prompted outrage in Moscow earlier this week when he said he thought it was "completely legitimate" for Ukrainian forces to strike against targets in Russia and it was "not necessarily a problem" if they used weapons donated by Britain.

In an interview with Times Radio, Heappey said: "Ukraine was a sovereign country that was living peacefully within its own borders and then another country decided to violate those borders and bring 130,000 troops across into their country.

"That started a war between Ukraine and Russia, and in war Ukraine needs to strike into its opponent's depth to attack its logistics lines, its fuel supplies, its ammunition depots, and that's part of it."

Nuclear Escalation and Russian Propaganda: Conjuring a Crisis - While continuing its armed assault on the battlefields of Donbas, the Kremlin is boosting its attacks against Ukraine on the information front as well. Russian propaganda's continuing dehumanization of Ukraine and the West, which backs the Ukrainian defense efforts, is being used to justify increasingly radical methods in the Kremlin's so-called "special military operation."

Perhaps the most serious event last week was a briefing by Russia's Ministry of Defense, during which top officials said that the United States was preparing provocations in order to "accuse Russia of using chemical, biological or tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine." According to the Ministry, "sabotage is possible at chemical and biological facilities in Kharkiv and Kyiv or at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant," and will be accompanied by tens of thousands of civilian casualties (Mil.ru, April 23).

Knowing the Russian authorities' modus operandi of blaming others for what they plan to do themselves, such baldly articulated allegations raised the level of concern among many observers, especially given that Ukrainian experts have previously noted the real likelihood that Russia will use nuclear or chemical weapons in Ukraine. Weeks later, the US CIA chief, William Burns, expressed the same concerns (BBC—Russian service, April 15).

Russia has recently and increasingly engaged in other "false flag" provocation allegations.

Putin

Putin shakes uncontrollably while meeting Belarusian President - Recently, a video of Russian President Vladimir Putin shaking uncontrollably during his meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. The video was before Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 this year. In the video, Putin could be seen holding his right hand to his chest apparently to prevent it from shaking.

The Russian Premier's leg also seemed to be stiff, and he appeared to be stumbling, which is one of the symptoms of PD. The 69-year-old Russian President looked unsteady as he moved toward Lukashenko to greet him.

Putin's War In Ukraine Has Left Russia 'Vulnerable As A Nation' – Retired Army General Curtis Michael Scaparrotti argues that Russian President Vladimir Putin's ability to return "as a respectable leader on the world stage is done" and Russians will have to come to terms with the harm that's been done to them as a "nation among nations," including through sanctions and other punitive measures.

"Russia is vulnerable, I think, as a nation at this point," Scaparrotti told RFE/RL's Georgian Service in a recent interview, "and the sanctions certainly have impacted their national resources and their economy, et cetera."

Putin's Nemesis Says 'Assume the Worst' Over Russian Oligarch Deaths - Financier and political activist Bill Browder has said "one should assume the worst" about the spate of unexplained deaths among Russian oligarchs.

Investigations are underway into the deaths of Vladislav Avaev, former vice president of Gazprombank, as well as his wife and daughter, who were found dead in their Moscow apartment on April 18.

A day later, Sergey Protosenya, ex-manager of Russia's energy giant Novatek, his wife and daughter were also found dead in a house in Spain.

Push Russia out of whole of Ukraine, says Truss - Russian forces must be pushed out of "the whole of Ukraine", the Foreign Secretary Liz Truss has said. In a keynote speech in London, Ms Truss said victory for Ukraine was now a "strategic imperative" for the West.

This amounts to the clearest statement yet of Britain's war aims which have, until now, been limited to stating that President Putin's invasion of Ukraine "must fail and be seen to fail". She said Western allies must "double down" in their support for Ukraine.

"We will keep going further and faster," Ms Truss said, "to push Russia out of the whole of Ukraine."

This implies that Russian forces must leave not just the territory occupied in recent weeks since their invasion on 24 February but also those areas they invaded and annexed eight years ago, such as Crimea in the south and parts of the eastern Donbas region.

She said: "The war in Ukraine is our war - it is everyone's war... because Ukraine's victory is a strategic imperative for all of us. "Heavy weapons, tanks, airplanes - digging deep into our inventories, ramping up production. We need to do all of this."

"We cannot be complacent - the fate of Ukraine remains in the balance. And let's be clear - if Putin succeeds there will be untold further misery across Europe and terrible consequences across the globe.

Russia's president Vladimir Putin warned earlier on Wednesday that any country meddling in Ukraine would be met with a "lightning" fast response.

Humanitarian

Ukraine files first war crime charges for Bucha atrocities - Ukraine Releases Names Of Russian Soldiers Suspected Of Torturing Civilians In Bucha - Ukrainian Prosecutor-General Iryna Venediktova has released the names of 10 Russian soldiers suspected of torturing civilians in the town of Bucha, near Kyiv, during weeks of occupation.

Venediktova said on April 28 that the soldiers of the 64th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade of the Russian armed forces are suspected of "cruelty toward civilians and other war crimes."

She identified the suspects as privates Grigory Naryshkin, Vasily Knyazev, Sergei Peskaryov, and Albert Radnaye; corporals Semyon Maltsev, Mikhail Kashin, Andrei Bizyayev, and Dmitry Sergienko; Junior Sergeant Vyacheslav Lavrentyev; and Sergeant Nikita Akimov.

"Filtration Camps" - OSCE Envoy Says Evidence Of 'Filtration Camps' Emerging From Areas Of Ukraine Claimed By Russian Forces. The U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) says there is credible evidence that Russian forces have been rounding up people in areas of Ukraine's south and east and detaining them in "filtration camps," where they are interrogated.

On April 28, Ambassador Michael Carpenter told the Permanent Council of the OSCE that there has been "credible reporting" that Russia's forces are detaining people in these regions and "brutally interrogating them for any supposed links to the legitimate Ukrainian government or to independent media outlets."

Impacts

Risk of recession in Europe, US and China is rising by the day - A recession in Europe is almost inevitable if the war in Ukraine escalates, and Germany, which has been fiercely resisting calls to pull the plug on Russian oil and gas, finally relents. China is finding it increasingly difficult to sustain positive growth in the face of draconian Covid-19 lockdowns, which have already brought Shanghai to a screeching halt and now threaten Beijing. In fact, the Chinese economy may already be in recession. And with US consumer prices currently increasing at their fastest rate in 40 years, prospects for a soft landing for prices without a big hit to growth look increasingly remote.

Kazakhstan pushes back at threats of prominent Russian propagandist - Kazakhstan has hit back at a prominent Russian television talk show anchor who published a tirade on his YouTube channel inveighing at the Kazakh authorities for cancelling annual World War II victory commemoration events and warning that the country might incur the same fate as Ukraine.

The Foreign Ministry in Nur-Sultan said on April 27 that Tigran Keosayan, one half of a Russian propaganda powerhouse with his wife Margarita Simonyan, who heads Kremlin-run broadcaster RT and the Rossiya Segodnya state media holding, may now be barred from entering Kazakhstan for his comments.

EU to suspend tariffs on Ukraine imports for one year, Kyiv grateful - The European Commission yesterday proposed a one-year suspension of import duties on all Ukrainian goods not covered by an existing free trade deal to help the country's economy during the war with Russia.

The measures will apply in particular to fruit and vegetables, subject to minimum price requirements, agricultural products facing quotas, and certain industrial goods, tariffs on which were only due to be phased out by the end of 2022.

That phase-out, set out in the 2016 EU-Ukraine free trade agreement, applies to fertilizers, aluminum products and cars. The European Union will also exempt Ukraine from safeguard measures that limit steel imports and lift anti-dumping tariffs the EU currently imposes on Ukrainian steel tubes, hot-rolled flat steel products and ironing boards.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he had discussed the proposal with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Wednesday and expressed his gratitude.

NATO says ready to support Kyiv in a war against Russia that could last years - NATO is ready to support Ukraine for years in the war against Russia, including helping Kyiv to advance from old Soviet-era weapons to modern Western military equipment, the alliance's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday.

"We need to be prepared for the long term...There is absolutely the possibility that this war will drag on and last for months and years," Stoltenberg told a youth summit in Brussels, adding that NATO allies were preparing to help Ukraine to move on to NATO-standard weapons.

'Revolutionary' intelligence sharing between U.S. and Ukraine prevented fall of Kyiv - In an unprecedented information-sharing operation, U.S. spy agencies divulged the co-ordinates of Russian forces to Ukrainian troops, allowing them to pre-empt attacks.

The United States helped foil Moscow's efforts to take Kyiv and repelled its advances elsewhere by sharing such detailed intelligence that Ukraine knew exactly when and where Russian bombs would fall, it has emerged.

In an unprecedented information-sharing operation, U.S. spy agencies divulged the co-ordinates of Russian forces and aircraft to Ukrainian troops, allowing them to pre-empt attacks.

The intelligence led Ukraine to shoot down a Russian aircraft carrying troops to the Hostomel airport in the Kyiv suburbs in the early days of the war, according to NBC News. The downing of the plane helped thwart Moscow's hopes of flooding the area with troops and equipment.

Earlier reports suggested several Russian helicopters were hit by missiles before they reached the airport. An effort to take control of a military airbase in Vasylykiv, south of Kyiv, also met stiff resistance.

Cooking oil shortages - The war in Ukraine has worsened the already devastating global cooking oil shortage that has affected all countries since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A variety of industries and services have been affected by shortages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 but now, as a new world order dictated by the war in Ukraine takes shape, certain product lines are contending with even deeper issues. Case in point: the cooking oil shortage of 2022.

From shortages of popular products at Starbucks to furniture delays and Christmas tree shortages, citizens of the world are by now used to hearing about scarcities that inevitably lead to rising prices of goods, but it seems like global cooking oil costs have been particularly affected by the war in Ukraine, and things probably won't get better any time soon.

"Global cooking oil prices have been rising since the COVID-19 pandemic began for multiple reasons, from poor harvests in South America to virus-related labor shortages and steadily increasing demand from the biofuel industry," reports NPR. "The war in Ukraine—which supplies nearly half of the world's sunflower oil, on top of the 25% from Russia—has interrupted shipments and sent cooking oil prices spiraling."

To put it simply: Russia and Ukraine are the main exporters of cooking oil. Given the current political situation, the two countries are either choosing or unable to supply others with the usual amounts of the products. The resulting shortage in turn causes an increase in prices.

The four big threats to China's economy - The following commentary is co-authored by William R. Rhodes, CEO of William R. Rhodes Global Advisors, former chairman and CEO of Citibank, and author of "Banker to the World: Leadership Lessons from the Front Lines of Global Finance"; and by Stuart Mackintosh, executive director of nonprofit The Group of Thirty. Following are the four main threats to China's economy (as redacted);

1. **Real estate** - Chinese real estate defaults continue. Last year saw a record number of defaults among Chinese developers, from Evergrande on down. S&P estimates that between 20% and 40% of property developers may face default.
2. **'Zero-Covid'** - As China's housing markets shake, the effects of the pandemic policy are making economic matters worse.
3. **Risky external loans** - Interest rates are rising as the developed world tries to contain inflation. Many loans made by Chinese entities as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative are not only straining balance sheets in low-income countries across the globe but will also burden China's banks with nonperforming loans. That, in turn, will affect the economic performance of those banks, which are key conduits for Chinese domestic investment, businesses and the economy.
4. **Russia's invasion of Ukraine** - Globalization — the engine that powers China's economy — risks stalling under the pressure of the pandemic and Russia's war with Ukraine. Supply chains are stretched and broken, or else being reconstituted with new routes and links.

Containment

Australia takes the fight to Russia in Ukraine as video shows nation's prized Bushmasters on the frontlines - and why Putin should be worried. Australia's Bushmaster combat vehicles have been filmed in action by Ukrainian troops defending their homeland against Russia's invasion. Scott Morrison sent 20 of the armored transport vehicles to



Ukraine as part of military support package alongside Western allies. A video posted on Twitter appears to show Ukrainian troops travelling in a Bushmaster with a Ukrainian flag painted on the outside.



Australia also announced yesterday that it was sending 155mm howitzers to Ukraine as well. Nearly all NATO countries are sending additional field artillery to Ukraine in order to bolster its defensive and offensive capabilities.

Field battles are underway in Eastern Ukraine and aside from howitzers and other armored vehicles, a constant supply of ammunition and missiles needs to continue.

German lawmakers overwhelmingly approve heavy weapons deliveries - In a historic move, lawmakers in Germany have given the official green light to send "heavy weapons and complex systems" to Ukraine. But many of them also criticized Chancellor Olaf Scholz for not being in Berlin.

In addition to heavy weapons, such as anti-aircraft systems and armored vehicles, the measure passed by German MPs included provisions for sending heavier equipment to eastern NATO allies as well.

Military aid should continue and accelerate wherever possible, according to the proposal backed by the ruling coalition and the biggest opposition party, the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU).



Germany will also deploy more soldiers to boost NATO presence in eastern Europe and encourage Russian soldiers to lay down their arms and seek asylum in Germany and the EU.

Additionally, the measure foresees an appeal to China for it to "abandon its acceptance of war" and actively support a truce.

Bulgarian PM, Main Ruling Party Vow Support To Arm Ukraine After Gazprom Cutoff - Bulgaria's main ruling alliance has responded to a Russian gas cutoff by abandoning the hesitancy that has kept that Black Sea state from supplying military aid to Ukraine, capping off two days of political messaging with visiting Prime Minister Kiril Petkov declaring outside the Ukrainian capital that it would be "inhuman to remain uninvolved" as Russia's invasion unfolds.

Biden sends Congress \$33 billion request for Ukraine aid - President Biden announced Thursday that his administration sent Congress a supplemental request for an additional \$33 billion for humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine to help the country thwart Russia's unprovoked invasion.

Why it matters: The proposal would be a major increase in U.S. funding for Ukraine if passed by Congress, coming on top of the \$13.6 billion in assistance that the U.S. allocated the country last month.

Russia Bolsters Attack In Ukraine's West To Slow Down Western Arms Supply To Kyiv - Russian troops have stepped up their attacks in the western part of Ukraine, sabotaging supply lines and crucial infrastructure. While attacks and counterattacks in the eastern Donbas region have caught worldwide attention, Moscow has waged a seemingly invisible war in Ukraine's west including on a deep-rooted railway network, fuel depots and a critical bridge. Notably, the western region plays an irreplaceable role not only in linking western countries to Ukraine but also in running its economy.

Widening of conflict and war

US and European officials are increasingly concerned that Russia's war on Ukraine could spread to other countries, report says.

There is growing concern among US and European officials that the war in Ukraine could spill beyond its borders and engulf other countries, The New York Times reported.

Officials from Western countries allied with Ukraine in the war against Russia fear a possible spread of the conflict in three ways, the report claims.

They fear it could physically spread into neighboring states, spread into cyberspace through hacking and other cyberattacks, and spread into NATO countries facing a cutoff of Russian oil or gas.

According to the NYT, the concerns are founded on the belief that the war could drag on for several years. It could result in a more direct, Cold War-style confrontation between Russia and the US as the superpowers seek to reduce each other's strength, according to the report.

In recent weeks, the conflict has impacted several nations near Ukraine. Russia has cut gas supplies to NATO states Poland and Bulgaria, there have been a series of mysterious explosions in cities in Russia, and Russia has menaced Finland and Sweden after the Nordic states said they were seeking to join NATO.

There have also been explosions this week in Transnistria, a Russian-controlled region in Ukraine's southern neighbor Moldova, raising concerns the conflict may spread to the state.

Russian President Vladimir Putin in a speech Wednesday warned against Western intervention in Ukraine, saying that "if someone intends to intervene in the ongoing events from the outside, and create strategic threats for Russia that are unacceptable to us, they should know that our retaliatory strikes will be lightning-fast."

Gagauzia Now a Bellwether of Putin's Broader Military Intentions - Over the last 30 years, Moscow has frequently sought to use the Christian Turkic Gagauz in Moldova, along with separatist Transnistria, as leverage to prevent or reverse Chisinau's moves toward further integration with Romania and Europe. But in recent days, with growing signs that Moscow may extend its war in Ukraine into Transnistria—possibly recognizing the government there as independent or using that territory as the basis for an attack on Odesa—the significance of what Russia does with regard to Gagauzia has increased dramatically not only for Moldova but for the rest of the world. On the one hand, as Moscow is coming to recognize, the authorities in Transnistria are now a somewhat less enthusiastic partner for Moscow than they were in the past given the region's trade with the European Union (see EDM, April 12). But on the other hand, if Moscow does seek to put the Gagauz in play in the current context, that will be an unambiguous sign that Putin's war in Ukraine is only part of his plans for a much broader military offensive. And the countries around Russia's periphery and in the West will have no choice but to respond. (Eurasia Daily Monitor).

Moldovans are taking the situation seriously. Former defense minister Vitalie Marinuța, for instance, in an interview with the Russian paper Nezavisimaya Gazeta, asserted that Moldova has much to fear in the current situation in light of the so-called "Primakov plan," which envisages a new "Novorossiya" ("New Russia") extending from Donbas to Moldova's Transnistria. Such Russian efforts could take shape in the coming weeks or months, he said; but more immediately, the threat to Chisinau comes from what he termed "the fifth column," consisting of the Gagauz autonomy, several "northern districts of the Republic of Moldova, and "also pro-Russian Socialists and Communists" (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, April 25).

Georgians Support Euro-Atlantic Integration and Want Visa Regime for Russians - On April 21, a United States Congressional delegation arrived in Georgia, as part of a wider European trip, to "discuss the strengthening of the Transatlantic alliance." In addition to the South Caucasus country, the US lawmakers, all members of the Democratic Party, also visited France and Italy. The delegation was headed by the chair of the Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, Senator Christopher Coons (DE). Other participants included Michigan Senator Gary Peters (chairperson of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee), Senator Robert Casey (PA), as well as Representatives Stephanie Murphy (FL), Kathleen Rice (New York), David Cicilline (RI), and Theodore Deutch (FL). They met in Tbilisi with Georgian government officials, the opposition and civil society leaders (Formulanews.ge, April 22).

"We are here intentionally, we are here because we know Georgia is important... We see the critical steps Georgia is taking in this region and on the world stage," Senator Coons said during the joint press briefing with Georgian President

Salome Zurabishvili. The US lawmaker also spoke of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the Georgian response to the conflict. "We are so grateful for your clear and forceful statement, for your nation's votes at the United Nations, for the assistance you are providing, both as individuals, as Georgian families, and churches, and communities and as a nation," he underscored (Civil.ge, April 21).

Former CIA Director Warns Of Putin's Next Move In Ukraine - Former CIA director John Brennan said Russian President Vladimir Putin knows his plan for invading Ukraine has "completely collapsed" and warned the Russian leader will resort to threatening the West.

On Wednesday's broadcast of MSNBC's "Deadline: White House," Brennan told anchor Nicolle Wallace that Putin is "clearly reacting to ongoing developments" in Ukraine, "many of which have been setbacks to Russia," he said.

Putin has "been adapting on the military battlefield in Ukraine by consolidating and repositioning forces along the east and the south" because of "the pummeling" his forces have received, Brennan said. The Russian leader also is "reacting to the strength of NATO support and particularly the ongoing supply of weapons and ammunition to the Ukrainian forces," he continued.

Brennan envisioned Putin putting more pressure on other neighboring countries, such as Poland and Bulgaria, where he's cut off natural gas deliveries.