

Conflict Update # 53

May 8th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Key Takeaways

Russian forces are likely amassing in Belgorod to reinforce Russian efforts in northern Kharkiv to prevent the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive from pushing closer to the Ukraine-Russia border.

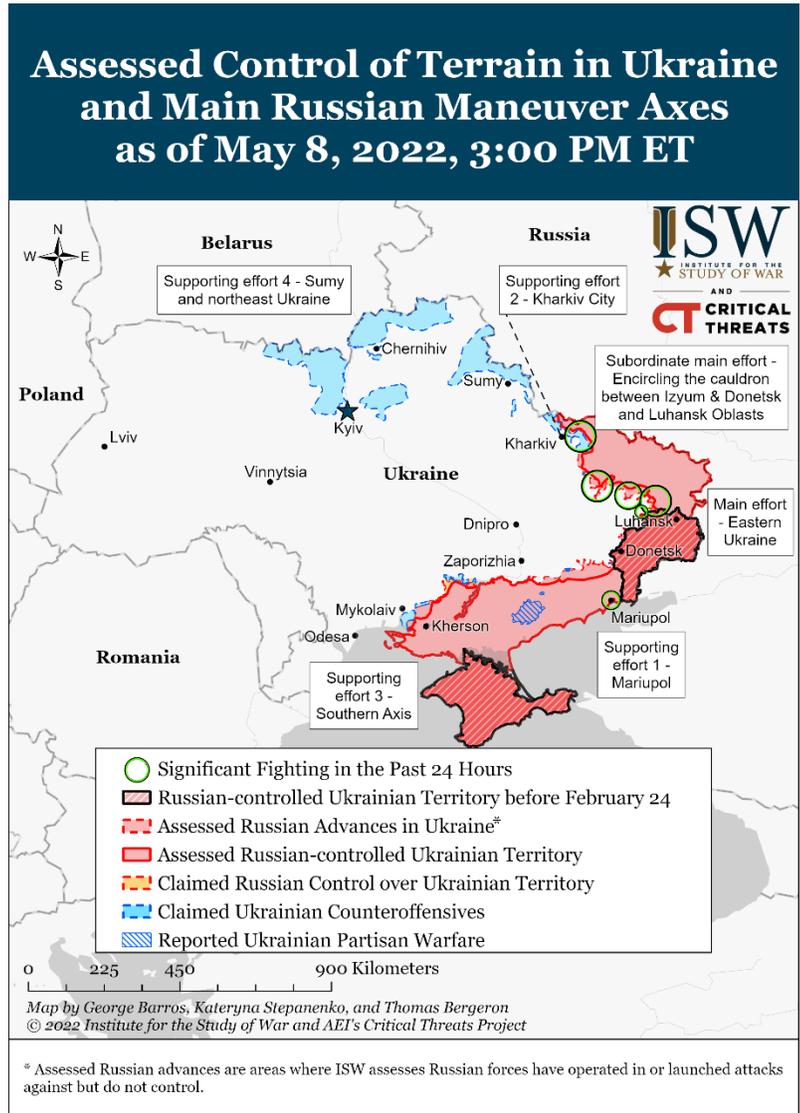
Russian forces near Izyum focused on regrouping, replenishing, and reconnoitering Ukrainian positions in order to continue advances to the southwest and southeast of Izyum.

Russian forces continued their ground attacks to drive to the borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts but did not make any territorial gains

Russian troops continued to assault the Azovstal Steel Plant and advanced efforts to economically integrate occupied Mariupol into the wider Russian economy.

Russian troops may be preparing for a renewed offensive on the Southern Axis but are unlikely to be successful in this endeavor.

Subordinate Main Effort—Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts - Russian forces did not conduct confirmed attacks in any direction from Izyum today. Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces continued to regroup units, replenish reserves, and reconnoiter Ukrainian positions to continue offensives in the Izyum-Barvinkove and Izyum-Slovyansk directions.



Russia intensified ground, air, and artillery attacks in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts on May 8. Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces withdrew from Popasna, confirming that Russian forces established full control of the city in the last few days. Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces are attempting to reach the administrative borders of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, which is confirmed by social media footage of ongoing fighting along existing Russian lines of advance. Ukrainian sources reported active fighting in Bilohorivka, Vojevodivka, and Lysychansk, indicating that Russian forces may intend to encircle Severodonetsk from the south (in support of ongoing operations in Rubizhne, north of Severodonetsk) and push west toward the Luhansk Oblast border. Ukrainian General Staff additionally reported that elements of the Russian 90th Tank Division are operating around Lyman in the vicinity of Shandryholove and Oleksandrivka, which both lie less than 20 kilometers from the Donetsk Oblast border.

Supporting Effort #1—Mariupol - Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in the Azovstal Steel Plant. Commander of the Azov Regiment Denis Prokopenko stated that the Ukrainian defense remains in Azovstal after the evacuation of all civilians and that fighting is ongoing within parts of the plant itself.

Russian authorities are advancing efforts to integrate Mariupol into Russian economic systems. Head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Denis Pushilin visited Mariupol's commercial port alongside Russian Deputy Prime Minister for Construction and Regional Development Marat Khusnullin on May 8 and claimed that products will start moving through the port later this month. Khusnullin's visit to Mariupol is likely indicative of the Kremlin's broader desire to capitalize on Mariupol's port access and integrate the city's transport capabilities into Russia's regional economic agenda.

Supporting Effort #2—Kharkiv City - Russian forces are likely amassing in Belgorod to deploy to the Kharkiv City region to prevent the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the area from reaching the Russian border, with reports that units of the 1st Tank Army are concentrating in Belgorod, Russia, for deployment to areas near the Ukraine-Russia border. Ukrainian General Staff also noted that the main Russian effort around Kharkiv City is oriented around preventing Ukrainian counteroffensives from pushing Russian forces to the international border. ISW previously assessed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive northeast of Kharkiv City has forced Russian forces to deploy reinforcements to the Kharkiv city area instead of deploying them to Russian axes of advance. The Ukrainian counteroffensive did not make any confirmed advances on May 8.

Supporting Effort #3—Southern Axis - Russian forces did not make any confirmed ground attacks on the Southern Axis on May 8. Ukrainian General Staff reported that they may be preparing for a potential offensive in order to improve their tactical positions and fix Ukrainian forces in place.

Russian forces focused on reconnaissance and regrouping frontline units in likely preparation to renew offensive operations on the Southern Axis, although the likelihood of their ability to do so successfully is doubtful. Satellite imagery notably showed their forces concentrating anti-aircraft missile forces and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) in Filatovka, northern Crimea, between April 27 and May 5, indicating that Russian troops are preparing to restart offensive operations, likely in the direction of Zaporizhia and Kryvyi Rih, in the coming days.

Russian forces additionally continued to target Odesa with missile strikes on May 8. The situation in Transnistria remains tense but unchanged.

Supporting Effort #4—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine - There were no significant events on this axis in the past 24 hours.

Immediate items to watch

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

Russia Moving Troops From Syria to Ukraine - Putin has ordered troops from Syria to eastern Ukraine, according to The Moscow Times. The Russian presence in Syria was 4,000 troops consolidated into one infantry brigade and three mechanized battalions, the Military Balance handbook for 2021 noted, according to reports.

Russia first started to signal the move out of Syria to Ukraine on April 16, when heavy losses in Ukraine reportedly forced the Kremlin to not rotate its "Syrian" units, according to the Times.

Also, Turkey banned Russian Federation civil and military aircraft flying to Syria from its airspace April 23, restricting Russia's options, the Times notes.

'Surrender is not an option' - Azov battalion commander in plea for help to escape Mariupol - Two thousand Ukrainian troops thought to be trapped inside steelworks after civilian evacuation.

Members of Ukraine's Azov battalion trapped inside Mariupol's Azovstal steel plant have said they fear they will be killed if captured by Russian forces, as they pleaded with Ukrainian authorities to help arrange their extraction.

Speaking to the media from inside the besieged steelworks, an Azov commander and lieutenant, looking gaunt and pale, said they had defended the city for the people of Ukraine and the rest of the world and needed a third party to negotiate their exit whether by land or sea.

There are believed to be 2,000 soldiers in the plant, 700 of whom are said to be wounded.

Putin

Interview: Why The 'Failure' Of Russian Spies, Generals Is Leading To 'Apocalyptic' Thinking In The Kremlin

To get a better understanding of how things might progress, RFE/RL spoke with Soldatov, who is also a fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) in Washington.

RFE/RL: What is your sense about why this view is being adopted? Is this to justify pushing for mobilization across Russia, as some people have theorized could be coming, or do you see something else driving it?

Soldatov - I think it's not only the [prospect of] mobilization, it's also about the feeling [from the military and intelligence services] that they have picked a fight with NATO, but in the wrong place, because [they] are sustaining high casualties but are not in a position to inflict any damage [in return] on NATO. This is a source of big frustration [for] the military. They're fighting in Ukraine and suffering very high losses while losing lots [of] equipment, [but] are not in a position to fight back as they believe they should.

[This is] also a good explanation for why they are suffering from all these problems [in the first place]. [They] can't blame [themselves]. Psychologically, it's very uncomfortable to say that [they] did something wrong, that [the] planning was bad, or that the logistics were not sufficient. [It's] much easier to say [that] the problem is what [they've] always suspected, which is that the West is being treacherous and attacking us in an [underhanded way]. [They believe] they started a small [conflict] in Ukraine and now they are getting attacked by the West disproportionately and that is why they are facing these problems.

RFE/RL: So where do you see this "apocalyptic" thinking, as you describe it, leading to? –

Soldatov: The biggest problem is about objectives. As an example, I checked recently [on] some polls conducted by Telegram channels [that] are really close to the Russian military and [they were] quite astonishing to me. They asked questions about what [soldiers thought] an acceptable objective to declare victory for this

war [would be], and you have around 25 percent saying that [they would] need the complete capitulation of Ukraine and more than 30 percent saying they would want to get Russian troops to the border with Poland.

But the most astonishing number is that only 6 percent said they would be happy with only [taking the] Donbas. That is very worrying. It means that the objectives pronounced by Putin at the beginning of the war are not necessarily the same ones the military sees as appropriate and acceptable.

RFE/RL: You have some unparalleled sources within the Russian intelligence services. Why do you think that they are still talking to you?

Soldatov: It was a big concern for me, obviously. After the war started, I thought we might lose some sources because my own anti-war position was very clear and, for [about] three weeks, [that's] exactly what happened. But after that, the sources came back, and it looks like [they did] for different reasons.

It's not like they are [talking] because they think the [war] is wrong. It's not that [at all]. It's about their sense of frustration and the need to blame someone for all these problems. You have the military blaming the FSB and the FSB blaming some particular departments within the FSB for the problems they are facing. So, it's basically a blame game.

Putin blasts 'Nazi filth' in Ukraine in Victory Day remarks - Russian President Putin blasted "Nazi filth" in Ukraine in remarks he made to commemorate Victory Day, the 77th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Putin's remarks also noted that he sent congratulatory messages to the Russian appointed heads of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine, which together make up the Donbas region, for "fighting shoulder to shoulder for the liberation of their native land."

Russia could destroy ALL NATO countries in 'half an hour' if there was nuclear war, head of Kremlin's space agency claims - One of Vladimir Putin's closest cronies claims Russia could destroy all NATO countries 'in half an hour'.

Dmitry Rogozin, head of the Kremlin's space agency, Roscosmos, also admitted the strongman's aim is to defeat the 'enemy' West and expunge Ukraine from the map.

'NATO is waging a war against us,' said the former deputy premier of the 30-state Western military alliance.

'They didn't announce it, but that doesn't change anything. Now it's obvious to everyone.'

The hardliner, 58, said: 'In a nuclear war, NATO countries will be destroyed by us in half an hour.'

'But we must not allow it, because the consequences of the exchange of nuclear strikes will affect the state of our Earth.'

'Therefore, we will have to defeat this economically and militarily more powerful enemy with conventional armed means.'

He hinted that Putin would put Russia on a war footing amid speculation that a mass mobilization is on the cards to bolster his flagging war effort.

Note – as mentioned in previous Updates, Russia cannot mobilize for war without it being subject to an invasion – as per the Russian Constitution. Putin cannot even call it a “War” absent such an event – precisely why he has called it a “special military operation.”

Again, as mentioned previously, without being able to call it a war, Putin is unable to send conscripted troops into a "hot" or "war" zone. This is language contained in each conscript's individual service contract.

Putin now faces only different kinds of defeat - Whatever else Russia's Victory Day parade is supposed to represent, it won't be any sort of victory over Ukraine, regardless of the spin President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin will try to put on it, writes defense analyst Michael Clarke.

This war is one that Russia cannot win in any meaningful sense.

Putin's foreign military successes around the world after 2008 were all achieved by using small units of elite forces, mercenaries and local militia groups alongside Russian air power.

This gave Moscow considerable leverage at low cost during interventions in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, Libya, Mali and twice in Ukraine during 2014, first in illegally annexing Crimea and then in creating self-declared Russian statelets in Luhansk and Donetsk.

In every case, Russia moved swiftly and ruthlessly in ways the western world was unable to counter except through graduated sanctions regimes - nothing that could reverse the reality. Putin was adept at creating "new facts on the ground".

In February he tried the same again on the grandest possible scale in Ukraine - to grab governmental power within about 72 hours in a country of 45 million people occupying the second biggest land area in Europe. It was an astonishing and reckless gamble and it failed completely in the first crucial week.

Putin now has few options but to keep going forward to make this war bigger - either bigger in Ukraine or bigger by advancing beyond its borders. Escalation is built into the current situation and Europe has reached a very dangerous moment in its recent history.

Having failed with Plan A to seize the government in Kyiv before Ukrainian forces, or the outside world, could react, Moscow then switched to a Plan B. This was a more "manoeuvrist" military approach to surround Kyiv and move in on other Ukrainian cities - Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Donetsk, Mariupol and Mykolaiv and simply snuff out Ukrainian armed resistance while Kyiv itself would be threatened with capitulation or destruction.

This, too, failed. Kherson was the only major city that fell under Russian control and has since continued to resist Russian administration. The fact is that Russian forces were too small to dominate such a big country; they performed very poorly for a mixture of reasons; they were badly led and dispersed around four separate fronts, from Kyiv to Mykolaiv, with no overall commander.

And they turned out to be up against a determined and well-trained Ukrainian army who fought them to a standstill in a classic demonstration of "dynamic defense" - not holding a line but rather hitting the attackers at points of maximum vulnerability.

In frustration, Russia has now moved to "plan C", which was to give up on Kyiv and the north, instead concentrating all its forces for a major offensive in the Donbas region and across the south of Ukraine, probably as far as the port of Odesa in the south-west - effectively to landlock the country.

This is the campaign we now see being played out in the east around Izyum and Popasne, Kurulka and Brazhkyvka.

Forces are trying to surround Ukraine's Joint Forces Operation, (JFO) - about 40% of its army that has been dug in opposite the breakaway Luhansk and Donetsk "republics" since 2014. Key Russian objectives are to take Slovyansk and, a little further south, Kramatorsk. They are both crucial strategic points for control of the whole Donbas region.

And the war has moved into a different military phase - a struggle in more open country, during better weather, with tanks, mechanized infantry and, above all, artillery - designed to devastate an opponent's defense lines before armored forces sweep in.

But the process is not so simple.

Russia's offensive got off to a staggered start and Ukraine's JFO has held the Russian offensive well short of the lines Russian commanders would have expected to reach by now. The Ukrainians have bought themselves some valuable time. A "race of the heavy metal" is under way as each side tries to bring in its heavy fighting equipment before the battle is fully joined. We can expect to see this develop over the next couple of weeks.

What happens in the Donbas, however, offers Putin only a choice between different types of defeat.

If the battle reaches an autumn stalemate, he will have precious little to show for so much loss and pain. If the military momentum shifts and his forces get pushed back, even more so. And even if the Russians succeed in overrunning the whole of the Donbas and all across the south, they still have to hold those territories for the indefinite future in the face of several million Ukrainians who don't want them there.



Source: UK MoD / Institute for the Study of War (21:00 GMT, 05 May)



Any significant Russian military success will likely create a major, open-ended insurgency that will get bigger for every district Russian forces may overrun. Putin went for broke in February with Plan A. The failure of that scheme means that plans B, C or any subsequent plans still leaves Russia going for broke - needing to suppress some or all of a very big country.

One way or another, Russia will have to keep fighting in Ukraine, either against the population, or against the Ukrainian army, and quite possibly both simultaneously. And as long as Kyiv sticks to its current line that demands Russian withdrawal before any concessions can be contemplated, there is not much Putin can do but carry grimly on.

The western powers will keep supplying weapons and money to Kyiv and will not be lifting powerful sanctions on Russia any time soon. Once Europe's energy dependency on it is greatly lessened, Russia has so little that Europe really needs, the US and Europe will be able to leave crippling sanctions in place with small cost to their own economies.

There is no way back for Vladimir Putin personally and he may even be indicted as a war criminal. His only political strategy is to make the war in Ukraine into something else - part of a struggle for Russia's very survival against the "Nazis" and "imperialists" of the West who relish the chance to take Russia down.

That's why it suits him to toy with the dangerous idea that Russia is facing a "Great Patriotic War 2.0" with the rest of Europe. We will probably hear a lot more about this on Victory Day. President Putin will claim to see light at the end of a very dark and long tunnel into which he has steered his own country.

Sanctions

Brazil Buys Russian Fertilizer - When the first Russian missiles struck Ukraine, the reverberations were felt 6,500 miles away, on the vast Brazilian farms that grow much of the world's soybeans.

Russia supplies a quarter of Brazil's fertilizers, and sanctions meant to punish Moscow for its invasion threatened to trap the crucial commodity from being exported. That posed a danger not only to the Brazilian economy, but also to the world's ability to feed itself. Within days, Brazilian officials warned farmers to cut back on a critical fertilizer, and experts forecast that the country — one of the largest exporters of corn, soybeans, sugar and coffee — had just three months before it ran out.

Now, two months later, Brazil is replenishing its fertilizer stockpiles — with help from Russia. Much like the Russian gas that has been flowing through pipelines into Europe, hundreds of thousands of tons of Russian fertilizer have arrived in Brazil since the invasion. And more is on its way.

Brazil scrambled to buy Russian fertilizer just ahead of the invasion to keep shipments coming early in the war. And though the purchase of Russian fertilizer itself has not been banned, Brazilian buyers have had to contend with sanctions on Russian banks and logistical hurdles that experts feared would still cut off trade.

But buyers have managed to find ways around those obstacles, including using a Russian bank excluded from sanctions and getting an assist from Citigroup in New York.

Western allies unveil new Russia sanctions on V-E Day - The U.S., G7 and European Union agreed to impose sweeping new sanctions on Russia ahead of its symbolic Victory Day holiday on May 9, including additional export controls and a commitment to phase out Russian oil.

Why it matters: Western officials fear President Vladimir Putin will use Monday's celebration of the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany to dramatically escalate his war against Ukraine.

The U.S. announced it would join the U.K. in banning its citizens from providing "accounting, trust and corporate formation, and management consulting services to any person in the Russian Federation."

The new American and British services restrictions will "work in tandem" with additional G7 export controls on "wood products, industrial engines, boilers, motors, fans, and ventilation equipment, bulldozers, and many other items with industrial and commercial applications," the White House said.

The U.S. and U.K. decided not to ban the provision of legal services to Russians "for now," but will continue to assess whether to expand the sanctions based on Russia's behavior, the official said.

In addition, the U.S. is sanctioning three of Russia's "most highly-viewed directly or indirectly state-controlled" television stations — Channel One, Russia-1 and NTV.

The sanctions will bar American advertisers from "funding Russian propaganda" and force the networks to domestically source video cameras, microphones, software servers and other broadcast technologies.

The U.S. will also impose 2,600 additional visa restrictions on Russian and Belarusian officials, including eight executives from Sberbank and 27 executives from Gazprombank.

Between the lines: "We picked goods, we picked services, we picked technologies that we and the Europeans and the G7 and our partners in Asia were the dominant suppliers of," the official said.

The services bans are especially "powerful" because U.S. consulting and accounting firms have been asked by Russian companies "to help them figure out how to reformulate their business strategies" and "hide their wealth" to blunt sanctions, the official added.

"We're shutting that down."

Megayachts racing across oceans show oligarchs' desperation - Before the \$325 million Amadea megayacht was thrust into a legal tussle in the South Pacific, the luxury vessel that the U.S. government claims belongs to billionaire Suleiman Kerimov embarked on an 18-day journey on its way from the Caribbean to Fiji, likely running up a fuel bill north of \$500,000.

There's speculation the superyacht was making its way to the Russian port of Vladivostok before authorities in Fiji seized it at the request of U.S. officials. The Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine by Russia has triggered rounds of financial sanctions by Washington D.C. and its allies that are aimed at punishing hundreds of oligarchs and business tycoons close to President Vladimir Putin. Various governments have gone after moguls' villas, planes and pleasure boats—seizing more than a dozen multimillion-dollar megayachts.

That's sent luxury vessels racing across oceans to locales that aren't as likely to impose or enforce sanctions. Working with Spire Global Inc., an analytics firm that uses nanosatellites to collect data, Bloomberg News has been tracking the longest trips of yachts connected to Russians tycoons on sanctions lists.

"In the past few months, we've seen the yachts of sanctioned Russian oligarchs travel to places they historically haven't gone and chart more miles than they typically do," said Simão Oliveira, a Spire web and application developer who built the yacht tracker.

All told, the Amadea has sailed about 8,358 nautical miles since Feb. 24, clocking nearly half of the total miles it's traveled in the past year, according to Spire's analysis.

Humanitarian

Russia allegedly destroyed ancient Scythian tombs in Ukraine – Russian forces have reportedly fired on ancient Scythian tombs last week in the Kherson region amidst its ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Ministry announced citing the Kherson Regional Inspection on the Protection of Cultural Heritage Objects.

The tombs are over 1,000 years old, according to weareukraine.info. According to the allegations, Russian forces arranged their positions to fire on the Scythian tombs.

The Scythians were a group of ancient tribes that lived in what is today Southern Siberia and were active for approximately 700 years from 900 BC to 200 BC, according to the British Museum. They were historically active in the Northern Black Sea.

Again, if true, these reports confirm Russia's attempt to eradicate Ukrainian culture and history.

Trudeau says Putin responsible for 'heinous war crimes' during surprise visit to Ukraine – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says it is clear now that Russian President Vladimir Putin is responsible for "heinous war crimes" following a surprise visit to the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv.

The brief trip was supposed to be kept under wraps until after Trudeau left Ukraine, but local officials and media broke the embargo Sunday morning.

A Russian paratrooper who was in Bucha during the atrocities was identified by a love letter with a lipstick kiss that he left behind - A Russian soldier in Bucha while atrocities were committed left behind an identifying document: a handwritten love letter signed off with an imprint of a red lipstick kiss.

Reporters from Reuters spent weeks in Bucha, Ukraine, after Russian forces completed their retreat from the areas around Kyiv last month. The report, published Thursday, includes new details about what happened in Bucha based on interviews with nearly 100 residents, documents left behind by Russian forces, and photo and video evidence.

One Bucha resident told the outlet he discovered the letter after returning home to find much of his house destroyed. It was in his living room among a pile of documents, including Ukrainian identity documents belonging to civilians the Russian soldiers had questioned or detained.

The kiss imprint was visible in a photo of the letter published by Reuters. The letter was signed by Oksana Rybakova and addressed to Aleksandr Logvinenko, a Russian soldier the outlet later identified as a paratrooper.

Containment

Report: US is taking part in the military operations in Ukraine, claims Russian speaker - The US is involved in coordinating Ukraine's combat operations and is thereby participating in military actions against Russia, claimed Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin.

Russian news outlet TASS yesterday, citing Volodin's Telegram channel post, said the US is taking part in the military operations in Ukraine.

"Today, Washington is basically coordinating and engineering military operations, thus directly participating in the military actions against our country," he said.

The report said the speaker of the lower house of Russia's parliament pointed out that he was not speaking only about the supply of arms and hardware.

"By demanding that leaks about the intelligence exchange with Ukraine be plugged, US President [Joe] Biden admitted that Washington had been declassified," Volodin said.

Impacts

Ukraine won't accept Russian dictatorship - German Chancellor Olaf Scholz says he strongly believes Russia won't win its war in Ukraine. His remarks come as the conflict overshadows commemorations to mark the end of World War II in Europe.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Sunday warned that there can be "no peace under Russian dictatorship" in Ukraine during a speech to mark the 77th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe.

"Ukraine will not accept that, and neither will we," Scholz said, according to the text released by his office of the speech that aired on German TV.

The chancellor said he is "convinced" that Russian President Vladimir Putin would not win the conflict, which began on February 24.

"Ukraine will prevail. Freedom and security will win the day – just as freedom and security triumphed over oppression, violence and dictatorship 77 years ago," he added.

Scholz also recalled how Russians and Ukrainians once fought together and made great sacrifices to defeat Germany's "murderous National Socialist regime."

But now, "Putin wants to overthrow Ukraine and destroy its culture and identity... [and] even regards his barbaric war of aggression as being on a par with the fight against National Socialism," Scholz said. "That is a falsification of history and a disgraceful distortion. We have an obligation to state this clearly," the chancellor added.

Widening of conflict and war

Is Ukraine conducting a sabotage campaign inside Russia? - A deadly fire at an aerospace research institute in Tver, northwest of Moscow. Another blaze at a munitions factory in Perm, more than 1,100 kilometers (680 miles) to the east. And fires in two separate oil depots in Bryansk, near Belarus.

Coincidences, or a sign that Ukrainians or their supporters are mounting a campaign of sabotage inside Russia to punish Moscow for invading their country.

Since the blaze at the Central Research Institute of the Aerospace Defense Forces in Tver on April 21, which killed at least 17 people, social media has leapt on every report of a fire somewhere in Russia -- especially at a sensitive location -- as a sign that the country is under covert attack.

No one is claiming responsibility, but analysts say at least some of the incidents, particularly those in Bryansk, point to a possible effort by Kyiv to bring the war to their invaders. In a post on Telegram, Mykhaylo Podolyak, a senior advisor to Ukrainian President Zelensky, called the fires "divine intervention."

Since Russian forces invaded Ukraine on February 24, more than a dozen blazes noted by people who document the war have drawn huge attention on social media, amid fears there is a concerted campaign of arson terror by the Ukrainians. Even fires late last month in Russia's far east -- at an airbase north of Vladivostok and at a coal plant on Sakhalin -- raised suspicions.

And on Wednesday, a massive conflagration struck a chemicals plant in Dzerzhinsk, east of Moscow.

"Russian saboteurs against Putin continue their heroic work," said Igor Sushko, a Ukrainian racecar driver who regularly posts photos and videos on Twitter of alleged acts of sabotage inside Russia -- but offers no proof they were deliberate.

Another Zelensky advisor, Oleksei Arestovych, was equally opaque to The New York Times, noting that Israel never admits its covert attacks and assassinations.

"We don't confirm, and we don't deny," he said.

Ukraine's Tiny Neighbor Suffers Economic Fallout From the War - Russia's conflict in Ukraine is piling pressure on the ex-Soviet nation of Moldova, just as it started trying to fix graft and other structural problems.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has spurred a rush of loans to help tiny Moldova defray the economic hit from the war raging next door. Things are so perilous that the International Monetary Fund is now calling on nations to send cash.

The conflict is piling pressure on the ex-Soviet nation, just as it started trying to fix graft and other structural problems.

Moldova is in some ways still caught between two worlds. It hopes to join the European Union but is still tethered to Moscow by energy. Tensions are also rising in the pro-Russian separatist territory of Transnistria, raising concerns Moldova may get pulled into a broader conflict.

The war in Ukraine could potentially push Moldova to make a decisive break with the past. The government has fast-tracked a bid to join the EU and, since February, has the technical ability to switch from Russian to European electricity and gas grids.

Yet with annual inflation at 22%, growth crashing from a post-Covid surge of 14% in 2021 to a projected 0.3% this year, and exports and remittances disrupted, the conflict could yet destabilize the nation of 2.6 million.

Putin's War Brings Risks to Moldova and Its Pro-Moscow Enclave

The risk, according to Rodgers Chawani, the IMF's resident representative in Moldova, is that so much is borrowed to rescue the country from external shocks that none is left for domestic reforms.