

Conflict Update # 322

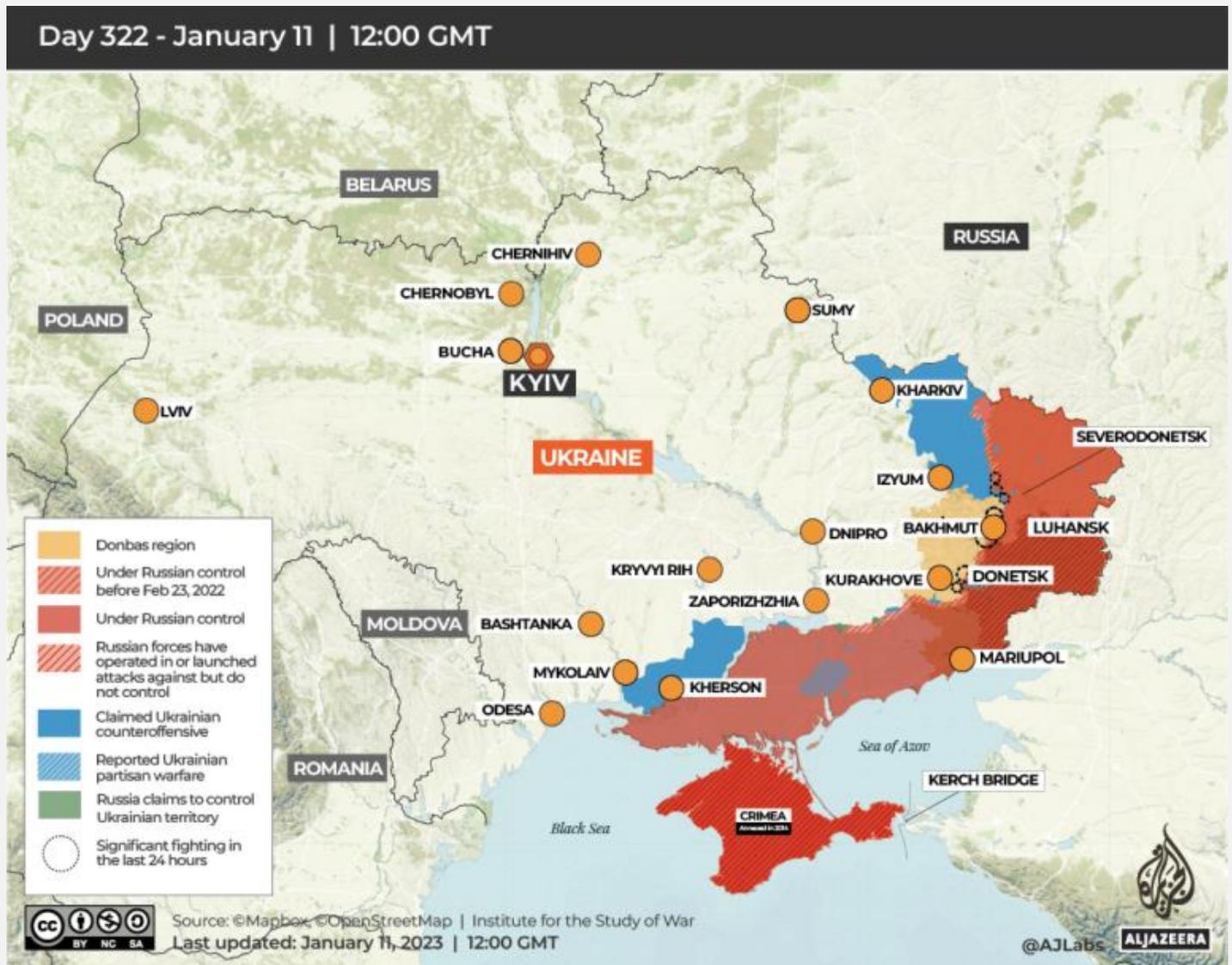
January 11th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 112,960 (490) soldiers killed, 3,094 (+10) enemy tanks, 6,159 (+5) armored combat vehicles, 2,078 (+5) artillery systems, 437 (+3) MLRS systems, 217 (+0) air defense systems, 285 (+0) warplanes, 275 (+0) helicopters, 1,862 (+6) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 723 (+0) cruise missiles, 17 (+1) warships/cutters, 4,826 (+9) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 184 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Ukraine must 'be ready' at the Belarus border, says Zelenskyy - Ukraine must "be ready" at the Belarus border even though it sees only "powerful statements" are coming from its neighbour, Zelenskyy said on Telegram.

He spoke after visiting Lviv region, discussing border protection and the security situation in northwestern Ukraine.

"We discussed state border protection, the operational situation on the border with Belarus, and counter-subversive measures in these territories," he said.

"We understand that apart from powerful statements, we do not see anything powerful there, but nevertheless we must be ready both at the border and in the regions".

Kyiv has made multiple warnings that Russia may use Belarus to launch a new invasion of Ukraine from the north.

Zelenskyy's office released footage of him at the coordination meeting and said the president also took part in a ceremony honoring the memory of Ukrainian soldiers killed in battle following Russia's invasion last February.

Belarus and Russia reinforce air defence units - Russian and Belarusian air defence forces have been reinforced with new missile units, according to Belarus's MoD.

"Anti-aircraft missile units advanced to designated areas and took up combat duty," the ministry said. It did not disclose how many units or missiles or where they were deployed.

Belarus plans aviation drills with its close ally Russia beginning on Monday.

Ukraine has repeatedly warned that Putin might try to use Belarus to launch a new invasion from the north, a step that would open a significant new front in the war.

'Heavy fighting continues in Soledar,' Ukrainian official says - Ukraine's deputy defence minister says Russian forces are trying without success to break through defensive lines to capture Soledar (pictured right) as fierce fighting rages on.

"Heavy fighting continues in Soledar," Hanna Maliar wrote on Telegram.

"The enemy has again replaced its units after sustaining losses, has increased the number of Wagner [mercenaries] and is trying to burst through our forces' defences and fully seize the city but is not having success," she said.

Another Ukrainian city completely destroyed by Russian artillery, missile and air fire.

Comment – Watching geolocation footage and coverage over the past few days, it does appear that Russia has taken this city, although not the salt mine areas to its west.



Russian airborne units surround Soledar, says defence ministry - Russia's defence ministry says its airborne units have surrounded the Ukrainian town of Soledar, which has been the focus of intensified fighting for months, from the north and the south.

At the same time, Russia's air force struck Ukrainian positions in the city, Russian agencies reported.

In its daily briefing, the defence ministry said assault units were fighting for Soledar.

The situation in Soledar is 'unclear' - Al Jazeera's Natacha Butler, reporting from Kyiv, says the situation in Soledar is "unclear" as both sides report differing battleground reports.

"Earlier, we heard from the head of the Russian mercenary group, Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, [who] claimed that his troops were in control of Soledar," Butler said, but "Ukrainian defence officials, for now, say their troops are still fighting intense battles.

"What we know is over the past few days, officials at Britain's MoD have said they do expect Soledar to come under Russian control in the following days," Butler added.

For Russia, capturing Soledar would be seen as a battlefield gain after months of military losses and would help them make their way to Bakhmut, which has been the site of intense fighting for months.

Ukraine sees surge of female fighters - More than 50,000 women are now enlisted in the Ukrainian army.

Eugenia Emerald has become somewhat of an icon the only woman in her unit. "All Russians are us. Ukrainian women."



in Ukraine, fighting on the front lines as a sniper -- scared of us," said Emerald. "Afraid of me, afraid of

Women on the front is still a relatively when Russia invaded Crimea, women wasn't until 2018 that female soldiers -- and, according to Ukraine's for close to a one-fifth of Ukraine's

recent phenomenon in Ukraine. As of 2014, were still barred from combat roles. It were finally given the same status as men Defense Ministry, women now account armed forces.

Russia hits Kharkiv after German FM's surprise visit - Russian attacks hit eastern Ukraine's city of Kharkiv, the governor has said, just hours after a surprise visit by the German foreign minister with her Ukrainian counterpart (which we reported on yesterday).

Annalena Baerbock pledged further German support for Kyiv on her unannounced trip, but Ukraine's top diplomat Dmytro Kuleba said Berlin's refusal to send his country battle tanks was costing lives.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz recently agreed to provide Ukraine with Marder infantry fighting vehicles long sought by Kyiv in its battle against Russia's invasion.

EU prepared for a long war: Sweden - The EU is prepared for a long war and will support Kyiv for as long as it takes, Sweden's foreign minister, Tobias Billstrom, said.

"Despite Russia's continued attempts to divide us, unity within the EU and across the Atlantic has been strong. The EU is prepared for a long war and will continue to stand by Ukraine's side with political, economic, military and humanitarian support for as long as it takes," Billstrom told a news conference.

He added that the EU would continue working on more sanctions against Moscow.

In December, the bloc passed the ninth package of measures since the start of the invasion in February 2022.

Comment – Every EU state, apart perhaps from Serbia and Hungary, will continue to support Ukraine going forward, increasingly so. The alternative is for a Russian-controlled nation right on their doorstep, bringing with it further political interference and imbalance. Russia just will not let up which is why the West needs to deal with them – once and for all. See the following article – they have started decades ago and continue in this bellicose fashion.

EU becoming a NATO vassal: Russia - Russia says the EU is becoming a vassal of NATO, citing the signing of a joint declaration in which the two organisations pledged to deepen their cooperation in response to Russia's war in Ukraine.

Earlier yesterday, NATO and the EU pledged to "take our partnership to the next level" in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the move "confirms the complete subordination of the European Union to the tasks of the North Atlantic bloc, which is an instrument to guarantee US interests by force."

She added that the Europeans faced "the unenviable fate of an American vassal, losing their positions in world politics and economics, falling into increasing dependence on Washington with every step."

The statement is in line with Moscow's previous comments that Western powers are involved in the war so they can see the fall of Russia. See **NATO** section below.

US Patriot training confirms participation in Ukraine conflict: Russian diplomat - US plans to train Ukrainian servicemen in the use of Patriot missiles provides further proof of Washington's participation in the Ukraine conflict, Russia's ambassador to the United States has said.

"The decision of the US defence department to organize a training course at Fort Sill in Oklahoma is yet another confirmation of Washington's de facto participation in the Ukrainian conflict on the side of Kyiv's Nazi criminals," Anatoly Antonov said in a statement posted by his embassy.

Antonov said the real aim of the US administration was to "inflict as much damage as possible on Russia on the battlefield by the hands of the Ukrainians."

Russia, Ukraine agree to prisoner swap during Ankara meeting - Russian Human Rights Commissioner Tatiana Moskalkova and her Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Lubinets have agreed to a prisoner swap during a meeting in the Turkish capital, Ankara.

The commissioners agreed on 40 prisoners of war each. Moskalkova said on Telegram the two discussed providing humanitarian assistance to citizens of the two countries.

They are later expected to visit the Turkish presidential palace, where President Tayyip Erdogan is scheduled to make a speech for the conference at 11:30 GMT.

A Turkish source said issues such as the Black Sea grain transport and a possible humanitarian corridor were expected to be discussed in the meeting.

Russian artillery fire down nearly 75%, US officials say, in latest sign of struggles for Moscow - As Russia's invasion of Ukraine enters its 11th month, US and Ukrainian officials tell CNN that Russia's artillery fire is down dramatically from its wartime high, in some places by as much as 75%.

US and Ukrainian officials don't yet have a clear or singular explanation. Russia may be rationing artillery rounds due to low supplies, or it could be part of a broader reassessment of tactics in the face of successful Ukrainian offenses.

Either way, the striking decline in artillery fire is further evidence of Russia's increasingly weak position on the battlefield nearly a year into its invasion, US and Ukrainian officials told CNN. It also comes as Ukraine is enjoying increased military support from its western allies, with the US and Germany announcing last week that they will be providing Ukrainian forces for the first time with armored fighting vehicles, as well as another Patriot Defense missile battery that will help protect its skies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, meanwhile, is apparently clambering to shore up domestic political support, US intelligence officials believe, for a war he initially would only describe as a limited “special military operation.”

Russian prisoners sent to the front lines in Ukraine have been publicly executed for not charging into enemy fire, captured inmates say - Captured Russian inmates who have been sent to the front lines in Ukraine as part of the Wagner Group, an infamous mercenary organization with ties to the Kremlin, say they've witnessed public executions of deserters and disobedient troops, according to a Tuesday report from Polygon Media and the independent Mozhem Obyasnit news outlet.

"Those who disobey are eliminated — and it's done publicly," Yevgeny Novikov, a former inmate who the report said was recruited by the mercenary group, said, according to a translation of the report from The Daily Beast.

Novikov said there were "squadrons of liquidators" that dealt with troops considered problematic.

In one instance, according to The Beast's translation, Novikov said: "Shelling began, one of the prisoners laid down and didn't cover his own [men]. The shelling stopped, he went back, and the higher-up shouted to him: 'Why didn't you go forward?' And they killed him. The higher-up is killed if his team deserts."

Alexander Drozdov, another former inmate cited in the report, said many of the Russian prisoners sent to the front lines in Ukraine by Wagner were drug addicts and "completely insane." While some recruited prisoners may desert or disobey orders, others "are just f---d up and bulldoze their way through," Drozdov said, adding that these fighters "are very different from ordinary mercenaries."

The first batch of prisoners to survive six months of fighting in Ukraine was recently released back into Russia, with the head of the mercenary group celebrating them as heroes deserving of great respect, while advising them not to drink too much, do drugs, rape women, or kill.

Russia is letting prisoners soak up withering Ukrainian fire in a 'savage' battle, 'trading' them and others for bullets, US official says - Russia is using prisoners and freshly mobilized troops to absorb heavy Ukrainian fire along the war's front lines in order to clear the way for its better trained forces to take ground, a US official said, calling the move a classic Russian tactic.

Prisoners recruited by the Wagner Group — a notorious paramilitary organization with close ties to the Kremlin — and others have recently been deployed to the forefront of fighting around eastern Ukraine's war-torn city of Bakhmut, which has become the epicenter of hostilities between Moscow and Kyiv.

These recruits have been forced to "take the brunt" of Ukrainian firepower in the area before they are replaced by "better trained forces" who move in behind them to try and claim territory, a senior US military official told reporters.

The official added that Moscow's current tactic of "trading individuals for bullets" has been used on the battlefield throughout Russian history. Russia, for example, did this with conscripts who were sent into the Chechnya region during the First Chechen War of the mid-1990s.

Comment – This is what Russian command is doing in the Soledad and Bakhmut battles – sending in the “human drones” who are eliminated – exposing Ukrainian positions which are then subject to attack.

Containment

NATO, EU to launch joint task force to protect critical infrastructure - NATO and EU will launch a task force to boost the protection of critical infrastructure in response to last year's attack on the Nord Stream gas pipelines and Russia's “weaponizing of energy.”

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the sabotage of the gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea last September showed the need “to confront this new type of threat.”

“This is a task force where our experts from NATO and the European Union will work hand-in-hand to identify key threats to our critical infrastructure, to look at the strategic vulnerabilities that we do have,” she said in Brussels, speaking alongside NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

Western and Russian officials have traded blame over the Nord Stream blasts.

Stoltenberg said: “Resilience and the protection of critical infrastructure are a key part of our joint efforts, as we have seen both with President Putin’s weaponizing of energy and ... the sabotage of the North Stream pipelines.”

U.S. is overhauling its marines on Japan's Okinawa - The US plans to shake up its marine force on Japan's Okinawa islands as Tokyo undertakes its biggest military build since WWII that will double defence spending over five years to deter China from attacking Taiwan or nearby Japanese islands.

Japan and the United States want to reinforce the islands separating the East China Sea from the Western Pacific because they are close to Taiwan and form part of what military planners refer to as the 'First Island Chain' extending down to Indonesia, that hems in China's forces (**Comment** – We discussed this First Island Chain US policy in previous Updates).

Tokyo fears the loss of Taiwan to mainland China would threaten shipping lanes that supply its oil and would undermine U.S. influence in the region.

The U.S. military presence on Okinawa, which began during World War Two, includes most of the 18,000 U.S. marines stationed in Japan. American bases cover around 8% of the main Okinawa island, stirring resentment among locals who want other parts of Japan to host the troops.



Comment – Similar to concerns above, India and the US are increasing their policing of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal – shaded in light blue in the map above. The islands are located just to the north of the Malacca Strait where nearly 25% of global trade and roughly 80% of China's and 90% of Japan's oil passes. See map above with the islands situated along the northern entrance to the strait.

The strait was a particularly important maritime route for the spice trade from the 15th century and was controlled by Portuguese Malacca in the 16th century before passing to Dutch and British control.

Poland is sending 14 German-made Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, President Andrzej Duda announced Wednesday during a meeting with the presidents of Lithuania and Ukraine in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv. "A company of Leopard tanks will be handed over as part of coalition building," Duda said Wednesday, and noted with an apparent hint of optimism, "We want it to be an international coalition."

Critical caveat: "The main statement will remain writing

decision-maker is Germany; without [the approval of] Berlin this just that—a statement," said security analyst Michael Horowitz, on Twitter.

Bigger picture: "By saying this publicly, Poland is putting more pressure on other possible members of this 'coalition,'" Horowitz says. "The goal is to put more pressure on Germany to agree to the delivery of those tanks."

Another thing: While 14 would certainly be welcome for Ukraine, it is still a far cry from the 300 tanks Kyiv's military says it needs to clear Russia from occupied lands.

Britain is considering sending its Challenger II tanks to Ukraine, the New York Times reported Monday.

However, so far just 10 of those tanks are under consideration—out of 225 of the tanks London has in stock. "Still, sending Challenger IIs could ratchet up pressure on Germany to commit to sending its Leopard II tanks to Ukraine, as Kyiv wants," since "Chancellor Olaf Scholz has maintained that Berlin would not be the first NATO ally to send such equipment into the war," the Times writes.

There are about 2,000 Leopard 2s in service in Europe with 13 different countries, but because they were originally made in Germany, the approval of Berlin would be required if any are to be re-exported to Ukraine.



about

were required if any

Canadian announces air defence system donation to Ukraine - Defence Minister Anita Anand announced that Canada is purchasing a National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS) and associated munitions from the United States to donate to Ukraine. This high-priority donation is the first Canadian donation of an air defence system to Ukraine.

A NASAMS is a short to medium range ground-based air defence system that protects against drone, missile, and aircraft attack, with a high success rate. Canada's NASAMS donation will help Ukraine strengthen its air defence systems against destructive air attacks on military sites, civilian critical infrastructure, and population centres.

This donation, valued at approximately \$406 million, comes from the additional \$500 million in military aid to Ukraine that Prime Minister Trudeau announced on November 14, 2022. The donation builds on Canada's longstanding military support to Ukraine, including our training mission - Operation UNIFIER, donations of armored vehicles, artillery, drone cameras, and winter clothing, and ongoing efforts by the Royal Canadian Air Force to transport Ukraine-bound military aid donated by Canada, Allies, and partners.

Canada remains committed to providing Ukraine with the military aid that it needs to defend itself from Russia's illegal and unjustifiable attacks, including intensifying Russian air raids.

CAF personnel are currently deployed to both the United Kingdom and Poland to assist with the training of members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine under Operation UNIFIER, Canada's military training and capacity building mission in support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Since the start of Operation UNIFIER in 2015, the CAF has trained over 34,000 members of the Security Forces of Ukraine in battlefield tactics and advanced military skills.

Putin

Situation in annexed regions 'difficult,' says Putin - Putin says that the situation in the areas of Ukraine that Russia annexed was "difficult in places."

However, at a televised meeting with officials, Putin said Russia had all the resources it needed to improve life in the four Ukrainian regions that Moscow claimed to have annexed in a "referendum" that Kyiv and its allies have referred to as illegal and a "sham."

Will Putin be toppled? – I do not subscribe to this school of thought, at least not at this juncture.

He is in too powerful a position and although may suffer continuing losses, has the ability to eliminate as many opposition and countering voices as he has to in order to stay in power.

What does he gain from stepping down? Nothing.

Witness Hitler who had opposition in all types of positions of authority – political, military, centuries-old dynastic families and elsewhere, but so long as he enjoyed the self-gratifying support of those around him and in turn those around them, he continued to rule Germany.

It was only once he started losing his grip, German cities were being destroyed and Allied forces entering home territory that he committed suicide – but didn't step down.

Putin is in a similar position where he commands support from those whom he has empowered.

There are countries in his political orbit and circle of influence who continue to support him and Russia for a multiplicity of reasons, from seeking a new world order to financial and political dependency on his and Russian goodwill, or are geographically just too close to the Russian heartland for comfort.

Only when he is deemed to be an outright loser will he be in danger of being toppled. And that will come from within, not from the EU or the West.

So I do not subscribe to a growing number of reports that he is ill, about to be deposed or killed, the timing is not right at this stage. He has too much power and those around him are too vested in their own wealth and righteousness. Public social media is tightly contained and Russian Main Street only hears what Putin wants them to. Autocratic in the extreme, but highly effective, nonetheless.

Sanctions

Putin's budget faces 'catastrophe' after Western price cap spells doom for Russian oil exports - The West's price cap on Russian crude oil will have a catastrophic effect on Russian finances and force the pariah state into imposing austerity measures this year.

The price of the "Urals" benchmark grade of crude oil exported from Russia has been falling steadily since the cap went into effect on Dec. 5. At that level, production can continue, but at a level much closer to extraction costs, thereby greatly diminishing Russian profits.

"The price on Urals crude is down sharply versus Brent since the start of the G7 cap," wrote Robin Brooks, chief economist of the international finance industry lobby group IIF. "That's good, as Putin gets less cash to fight his war."

Last year, the average price for Russia's "Urals" benchmark grade was \$76.09 per barrel, the country's finance ministry said last week.

The price plummeted in December, however. In the first month of the cap, it fell to an average of just \$50.47 per barrel, down nearly a third from the comparable period a year earlier.

Worse for Moscow, Urals crude recently traded at \$38—below the \$40 threshold that many believe to be Russia's production cost.

"The Ministry of Finance confirmed that everything with regard to Urals prices is not just bad, but very bad," Cetrocredit Bank economist Yevgeny Suvorov told the Moscow Times. "\$40 per barrel can be a real catastrophe for the budget and economy... If it becomes clear that \$45–\$50 is a new normal, the finance ministry will have to switch to an austerity regime this year."

No price cap losses, says Kremlin spokesperson - The Kremlin says it has not yet seen any cases of price caps on Russian oil imposed by the West last month, in comments about possible losses.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov added that Russia would do everything to protect itself from G7 plans to impose two sets of price caps on Russian oil products.

A G7 official said on Tuesday that they would seek to set two price caps in February, one for products trading at a premium to crude oil and the other for those trading at a discount.

Russia looks to crack down on its oil discount as plunging revenues blow up budget deficit - Russia plans to crack down on discounts for its oil as plunging export revenues blow up the Kremlin's budget deficit.

Moscow plans to monitor international crude oil prices and use the data to better stave off any discounts for its oil that emerge on global markets, the energy ministry said, according to Bloomberg.

Monitoring regulations are coming soon, and any measures meant to counteract the West's price cap will be based on market principles, the ministry added.

That comes as Russia's main oil product, Urals grade, is trading way below the G7's \$60 price cap, as the heavily sanctioned nation only has a handful of buyers to keep up its crude oil trade.

Those customers have also been able to score steeper discounts on oil as Russia struggles to replace European oil sales since an EU embargo went into effect on December 5. Russia had sold oil below the price cap to India. Russia has already suggested creating a price floor for its crude as a counter measure, and traders have criticized the Kremlin for

potentially further destabilizing the global energy market on the brink of a steep increase in demand as China unwinds from lockdowns.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is dealing with a massive budget deficit due to the price cap effort, and the gap reached a record 3.9 trillion rubles, equivalent to \$56 billion, in December alone. The full-year deficit reached 3.3 trillion rubles.

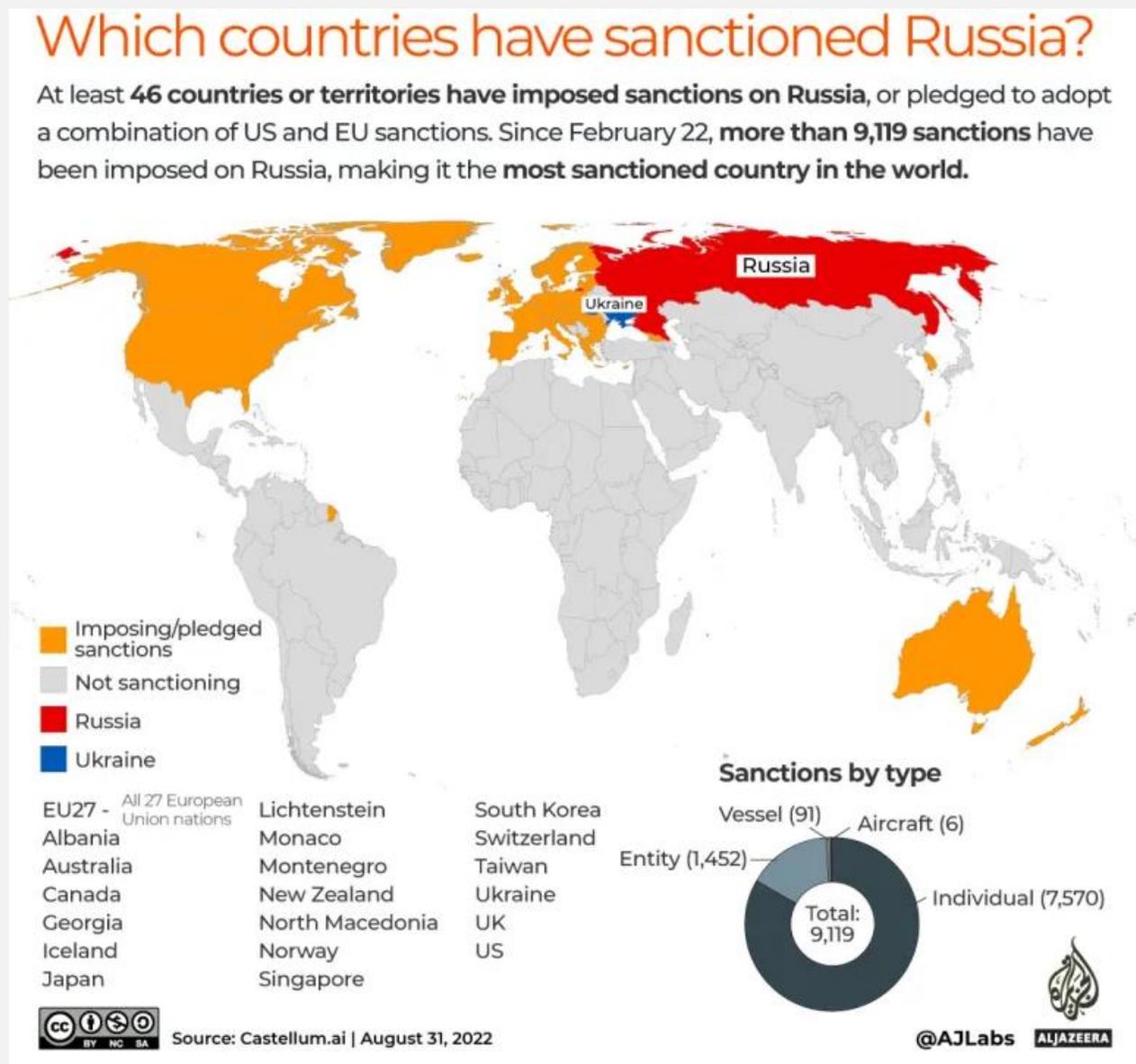
The nation's oil export revenue fell \$15 million in the last week of 2022, and if prices for Russian oil stay at December levels, then revenues will fall by about 2.4 trillion rubles, according to Bloomberg data.

Greece, Malta lag behind other EU members in freezing Russian assets - Greece and Malta lag behind their EU peers in freezing Russian assets, an internal document and an EU official says as the bloc considers confiscating the funds to help Kyiv.

EU countries have so far reported freezing about 20.3 billion euros (\$22bn) of sanctioned Russian assets.

Almost every EU member has reported placing holds on millions of euros, but Greece has only notified the bloc of freezing assets worth 212,000 euros (\$227,600), and Malta 147,000 euros (\$158,000).

“That is a bit surprising,” said the EU official, who spoke to the Reuters news agency on the condition of anonymity.



“Either they don’t have much, or they are not doing their job, or they have done something but not communicated to us even though they had chances,” the official said.

The EU has blacklisted about 1,300 individuals and 120 entities as part of the sanctions it has placed on Russia. It has also imposed economic sanctions on Russian trade and the country’s transport, energy, banking, media and defence sectors.

Sanctioned Russian aviation sector hit by slew of incidents in New Year - Russia's aviation sector, among the industries hardest-hit by Western sanctions over Ukraine, has suffered a number of incidents in the first days of 2023.

Experts and industry figures had voiced concerns about flight safety in 2022, a year that saw more than 130 incidents including 28 plane crashes.

Major plane makers Boeing and Airbus halted deliveries of new foreign jets and spare parts, forcing Russian airlines to “cannibalize” grounded aircraft.

Most Western countries closed their airspace to Russian aircraft in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, triggering Moscow to impose reciprocal measures.

Humanitarian

More senior Russian elites die – Russia's leading rocket specialist - who developed deadly Kalibr missiles used in Ukraine - becomes the fourth key defence official to die in three weeks

Pavel Kamnev, 85, was responsible for more than 20 weapons inventions. He was scientific director of Almaz-Antey Aerospace Defence Concern.

He was responsible for more than 20 weapons inventions and co-author of over 300 scientific and technical reports.

On December 25 General Alexei Maslov, 69, former commander of Russian ground forces with close ties to Ukraine, died 'suddenly' the day after Vladimir Putin abruptly cancelled a trip to the tank enterprise where he worked as an international sales ambassador.

Last week the inventor of 'world's best' Angara rockets Vladimir Nesterov died aged 74.

Nosterov's loss followed the 'sudden death' of Alexander Buzakov (pictured), 65, director general of Admiralty Shipyards, in charge of building new submarines armed with deadly Kalibr missiles

Number of Ukrainians in Poland pass 9 million: Polish EU representative - The number of Ukrainians who crossed into Poland since the war began has passed nine million, Poland’s representative for the EU said in a tweet.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Poland spent 8.36 billion euros (\$8.98bn) on housing, healthcare and other services for Ukrainians in 2022, the highest among member countries.

Ukrainian refugees are the largest ‘flight movement’ since WW2: Germany - In 2022, around eight out of 10 people seeking protection in Germany came from Ukraine as part of the largest flight of people in Europe since World War Two, the interior ministry said.

After Russia’s invasion in mid-February, 1,045,185 people who fled Ukraine were registered in Germany, it said, adding that most of them were women and children.

Putin’s “criminal war of aggression against Ukraine has triggered the largest flight movement in Europe since WWII.” said Interior Minister Nancy Faeser.

In addition to refugees, over 244,000 people filed asylum applications, 27.9 percent more than the year before.

The majority of asylum applications came from people from Syria, followed by Afghanistan, Turkey and Iraq.

“In other parts of the world, people are also fleeing war and terror, which is reflected in the significant increase in the number of asylum applications filed in 2022,” said Faeser.

NATO

After Ukraine invasion, NATO aligning strategy with ‘regional plans’: Former SACEUR - As NATO continues to adjust to the new geo-strategic reality in Europe in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a next step is for the alliance to work out plans for responding to aggression that will help better align member military postures to implement them, according to former Supreme Allied Commander Europe and retired US Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters.

“[W]hat will occur are graduated response plans that take into account NATO Military Strategy, the NATO Strategic Concept, and regional plans. And that allows for better alignment with military activity as it connects to whole-of-government activity throughout NATO. That is very, very important,” he told the Mitchell Institute today.

The new NATO Strategic Concept was agreed at the alliance’s summit in Madrid in June 2022, and was aimed at taking into account the new geopolitical landscape including Russia’s multi-faceted aggression in Europe and China’s growing power in the Indo-Pacific.

As part of that force realignment, he elaborated, NATO likely will maintain a “semi-permanent” presence along its Eastern front for many years to come, said Wolters, who retired just after the summit in July 2022.

He explained that the 30 NATO member nations have been beefing up their presence, via mixed nation rotational deployments in Eastern Europe starting before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

Geo-Military

Beijing fears Russia becoming 'minor power' under 'crazy' Putin – FT - Beijing is planning to reorient its foreign policy away from Moscow fearing a decline in Russia's economic and political clout as a direct result of its disastrous invasion of Ukraine and Putin's eventual downfall, the Financial Times reported on Tuesday, citing anonymous Chinese officials and regional experts.

Though Putin and Chinese leader Xi pledged to strengthen bilateral ties during a video conference in late December, sources told the FT that mistrust towards the Russian leader is growing among the upper echelons of the CCP.

“The invasion decision was made by a very small group of people. China shouldn’t simply follow Russia,” the FT quoted one anonymous Chinese official as saying. “Putin is crazy.”

China, according to the outlet’s sources and contrary to the widely accepted version of events, was unaware of the Kremlin’s plan to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year and expected a limited military operation at most.

During a meeting on Feb. 4, Putin reportedly informed Xi that Russia “would not rule out taking whatever measures possible if eastern Ukrainian separatists attack Russian territory and cause humanitarian disasters.”

Beijing’s failure to obtain accurate intelligence on Putin's plans left it unprepared for the invasion and resulted in the demotion of China’s then-vice-minister of foreign affairs and top Russia expert Le Yucheng, according to the FT.

Anonymous Chinese officials told the outlet they believed the Kremlin’s goals in Ukraine were doomed to failure and that Russia would emerge from the conflict as a “minor power.”

However, Beijing still has much to gain from its relationship with the Kremlin in the short term, seeing its closeness to Putin as a useful bargaining chip in its relationship with Europe, the FT sources said.

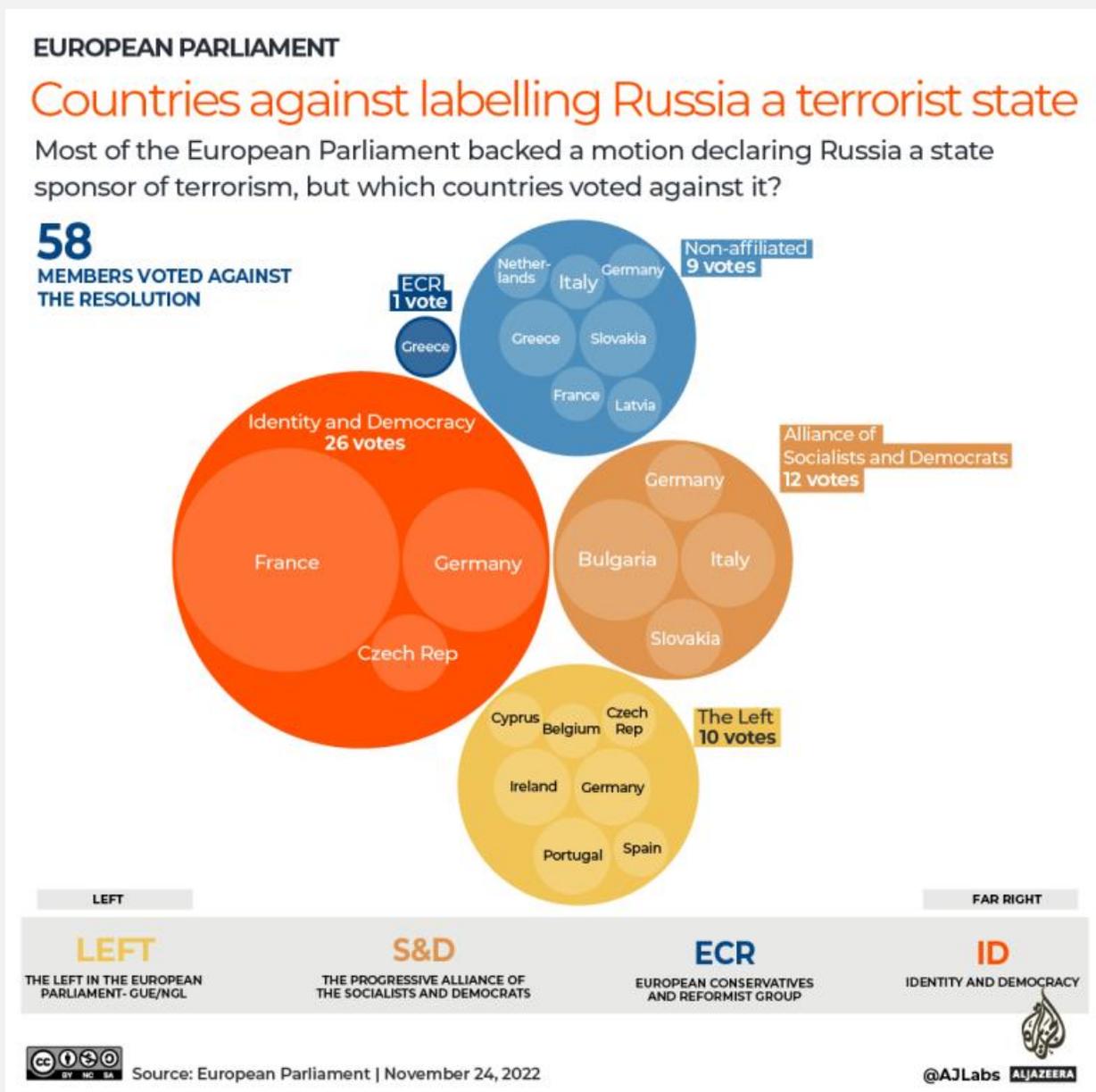
China is also hoping to profit from the post-war reconstruction boom in Ukraine, officials said.

Geo-diplomatic

Estonia tells Russia to reduce number of diplomats in Tallin - Estonia tells Russia to reduce the number of diplomats at its embassy in Tallinn by February, the foreign ministry said.

The ministry said that Russia should cut the number of diplomats to eight, equivalent to the number of Estonian diplomats in Moscow.

“In light of the fact that during the war of aggression, the staff of the Russian embassy is not engaged in advancing Estonian-Russian relations, it is our view that there are no grounds for the current size of the Russian embassy,” the ministry said.



Moscow said the expulsions were the latest example of “Russophobia.”

“It is long been no secret that Estonia is one of the most hostile states towards Russia,” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement on Tuesday.

“Russophobia has been elevated to the level of an official doctrine,” she said, adding that Moscow would respond to any “hostile actions” taken by Tallinn.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, Estonia has expelled three diplomats.

Geo-Demographic

5 Million fewer than in 2010, ethnic Russians make up only 72 percent of Russia’s population - Ethnic Russians, who form the core of Putin’s oft-promoted “Russian world,” are rapidly declining in number, with many of those who had identified as Russian in the past no longer doing so—thus driving down the percentage of the Russian Federation’s population that is ethnically Russian. According to Russian census figures released at the end of December 2022, even though Russia’s population increased slightly between 2010 and 2021, the number of people who identified as ethnic Russians fell from 111,016,896 to 105,579,179, a decline of 5,437,717—or almost 5 percent (Nazaccent.ru, January 5).

And, in turn, this decline means that the share of that country’s population identifying as ethnic Russian fell from 77.71 percent in the 2010 census to 71.73 percent in the current one, far below the 80 percent that the Kremlin routinely claims. The decline is especially striking because it has taken place in the wake of Putin’s Anschluss of Ukraine’s Crimea, which brought additional ethnic Russians within the borders claimed by the Kremlin, and because of Moscow’s increasing propensity to count as Russians those who declare a different national identity, such as the Siberians (Nazaccent.ru, January 5).

Over the past dozen years, some Russians may have assimilated into other groups, though the number of those doing so is not sufficient enough to explain a decline of this magnitude. Instead, it reflects a weakening attachment to the Russian ethnic identity that has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of citizens who have declared no nationality at all: 11 million now as compared to 5.6 million in 2010—or one in every nine residents. Available data suggests this is having a greater impact on those historically listed as ethnic Russian than on others, thus undercutting any hopes for the emergence of a civic Russian identity including both groups.

As Prague-based analyst Kharun Sidorov points out, some of the decline in claims of Russian identity reflects the difficulties of conducting a census in Russia during a pandemic. When census takers could not reach people or when people refused to open their doors, census officials used other sources to fill out the official forms, a practice that allowed them to input most data but not all. Census rules pointedly do not allow census takers to fill in nationality or native language data unless it is provided by the individual involved. But the census data that has been published, Sidorov argues, show that this limitation accounted for only a small part of the overall decline in ethnic Russians (Idel.Realities, January 7).

Most of the decline in ethnic Russians, Sidorov continues, reflects the declining importance of ethnicity as an identifier in ethnically homogeneous areas, such as the predominantly ethnic Russian oblasts of central Russia. When everyone is a member of the same nationality, that indicator often becomes less important than other identifiers. As a result, the numbers of those not declaring a nationality rose dramatically, and consequently, the share of ethnic Russians in the population fell equally so. Given that almost all the people in these oblasts are historically Russian, an ethnic Russian identity, often based on its difference with others, has weakened relative to regional or non-ethnic civil identifications. In the ethnically mixed areas of the Russian Federation, such as the non-Russian republics, ethnic Russians, in contrast, have continued to declare themselves Russian by nationality, doing so to maintain or even increase their share of the

population. Nevertheless, as ethnic Russians in predominantly Russian areas vastly outnumber the ethnic Russians in non-Russian areas, the share of ethnic Russians as a whole has declined.

Comment – Now we understand why Russia is capturing young Ukrainian children and sending them to Russian families to adopt. In the demographic pyramid and profile, those over 55 years are the “investors,” already having achieved Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs elements, those between children and the “Over 55’s” are the drivers of the economy, still establishing themselves, acquiring houses, cars and so on whilst children drive the future.

Aside from Russia’s extremely high ratio of alcohol-related deaths and dependencies, they are losing the demographic battle – a disastrous situation going forward.