

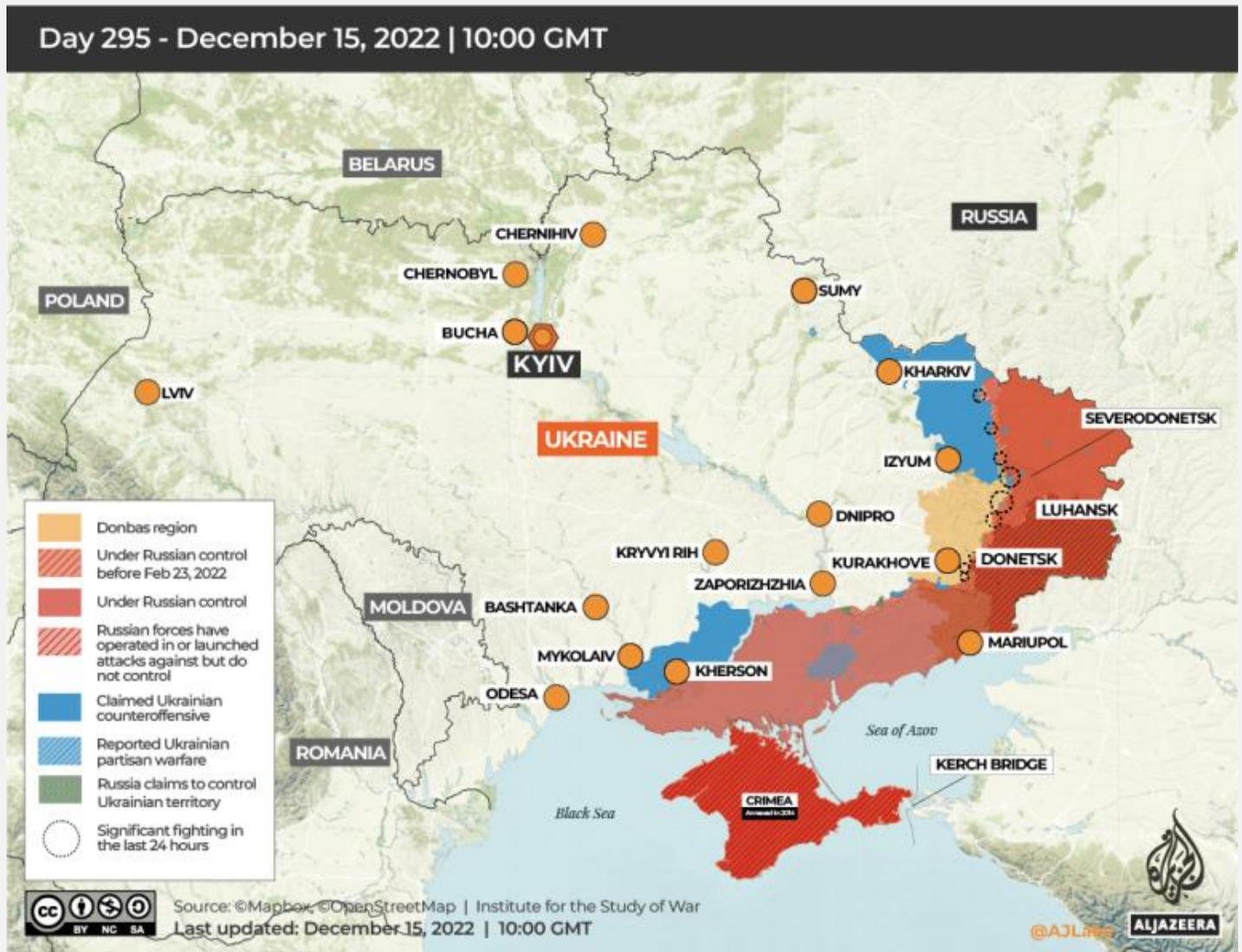
Conflict Update # 295

December 15th, 2022

Back issues at www.accgroupco.com

Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 96,590 (590) soldiers killed, 2,975 (+5) enemy tanks, 5,946 (+9) armored combat vehicles, 1,943 (+12) artillery systems, 406 (+2) MLRS systems, 211 (+0) air defense systems, 286 (+0) warplanes, 264 (+0) helicopters, 1,644 (+27) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 592 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,563 (+1) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 172 (+1) units of equipment.



Between the lines – Reading between the lines, something is afoot.

Ukraine has dramatically stepped up attacks on Russian command posts, fuel depots and arms dumps as well as bridges and other critical transportation infrastructure over the past week and a bit.

Critical equipment supplies are reportedly in place and further (Ukrainian) troop rotations are being reported even by the Kremlin.

Ukraine appears to have locked Russian forces into the areas around Bakhmut where the attrition rate among Russian soldiers is extremely high, with 3,820 killed there and in other contact areas in the past week alone, whilst Ukraine prepares its forces elsewhere.

Tanks, anti-aircraft batteries and huge amounts of ammunition are being delivered to Ukrainian front lines together with increased partisan activity behind Russian lines.

Russian forces are dug in on the eastern side of the River Dnipro in Kherson Oblast, in marshy ground that is difficult to understand with Ukraine eliminating their supply channels, backup positions and escape routes further east, increasing the potential for these dug in troops to be isolated en masse.

Ukraine is systematically attacking and destroying supply routes and command posts and now, closer to Russian lines, HIMARS and other Ukrainian missile ranges provide access to even deeper Russian positions.

North of the Ukrainian border, Russia and Belarus continue to build up forces just over the border in Belarus, feigning “training” exercises and “alert” reaction tactics. Ukraine has countermeasures in place but irrespective, any invasion from this angle will hamper Ukrainian focus to a degree.

But should Belarus engage in any attack it will not bode well for them in the country itself with anti-Lukashenko movements waiting to accelerate internal dissention activity levels.

Explosions, fires and incidents are breaking out all over western Russia (see article below) and, although no Ukrainian claims are on record, the Kremlin is blaming Kyiv for these “attacks,” has proclaimed a war footing across Crimea (see article below) and has seen Russian main street folk beginning to show signs of panic.

So, something appears afoot, geared to around mid-January. This will not be lost on the Kremlin and its generals, and on Putin himself. Not strange then that they may attempt a diversion by activating a northern crossing from Belarus into Ukraine, aiming for Kyiv.

Watch for escalation here with Stoltenberg, NATO SG warning of such an increased expansion risk, Poland repositioning heavy equipment along the Belarussian border, Macron attempting to convince the Putin to engage peace talks (a political chess move as a [geopolitical] sign of offering ahead of action?), Germany sending in long-promised weaponry and the Baltic countries all moving to increased awareness levels.

Earlier today further high-level talks between Zelenskyy and senior Pentagon officials, including Lloyd Austin, continued, with a report stating content surrounded the “position on the front line.”

Putin has changed his rhetoric over the past week to advance the notion that the mere (Russian) threat of nuclear use is enough to allow him unimpeded aggression in the west of the country with NATO and western countries afraid of triggering such an outcome.

Sanctions are beginning to bite with Russian oil exports under fire, China visiting the Middle East and earlier this morning placing a ban on exports of Loongson military grade processors to Russia.

Putin and the Duma will be keenly aware that the net is drawing ever-closer, seeing them growing increasingly desperate – and desperation invokes desperate measures, let’s hope not foolhardy.

Ukraine launches ‘most massive strike’ on occupied Donetsk region since 2014 - Ukrainian forces have unleashed the biggest attack on the occupied Donetsk region since 2014, according to a Russia-installed official, in the wake of heavy fighting in the east of the country.

Donetsk has been held by Russian-backed separatists for eight years and it is one of four Ukrainian regions that Moscow attempted to annex in October, in violation of international law.

“At exactly 7 a.m. the (Ukrainians) subjected the center of Donetsk (city) to the most massive strike since 2014,” the Moscow-appointed mayor, Aleksey Kulemzin, posted on Telegram.

“Forty rockets from BM-21 ‘Grad’ MLRS were fired at civilians in our city,” he said Thursday, adding that a key intersection in Donetsk city center had come under fire.

Kulemzin shared photographs on Telegram of damage to residential and commercial buildings and a cathedral.

There have been no immediate reports of casualties, according to Russian state media.

CNN cannot independently confirm Kulemzin’s claims.

Ukraine striking multiple targets across occupied territories – Ukraine has upped its strike rate against Russian targets well within Russian occupied zones. They have struck fuel depots, ammo dumps and control posts across eastern Kherson, Crimea, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk.

They are attacking transport infrastructure in and around Melitopol, at times returning to inflict further damage, as in the bridge just to the southeast of the city which is instrumental in Russian resupply into BTGs further west. Once intelligence indicated the bridge had not been destroyed, HIMARS fire was again directed at the target seeing it reduced to inoperability.

Increasing explosions and fires inside Russia – Russia is experiencing increased numbers of malls catching fire, fuel depots being blown up and launch stations attacked.

Although Ukraine does not claim responsibility for any of these incidents, the Kremlin has been direct in attributing the cause to Kyiv.

What remains to be seen is who precisely is committing these acts as some are very far behind front lines. It is estimated that more than 5 Russian malls have caught fire over the past few weeks. Always after hours with no civilian casualties but extensive damage.

Social media coverage shows huge explosions and fires creating panic in Russian main street folk.

Below is a map showing some of these “unexplained incidents” across Russia.

Explosion at Siberian oil refinery kills two people, injures five - A fire caused by an explosion at an oil refinery in Russia's Siberian city of Angarsk has killed two people and injured five others, local authorities said on December 15. The governor of the Irkutsk region, Igor Kobzev, said the fire did not affect operations at the facility. A probe was launched into the fire. In recent months, several fires have hit shopping malls and industrial facilities across Russia.

Satellite images of Russian-occupied Crimea, experts point to potential targets for Ukraine - Recent satellite images of Russian-occupied Crimea obtained by RFE/RL show airfields, air-defense sites, and ships that defense experts say could rank as prime targets for the Ukrainian military as it seeks to weaken Moscow's forces and recapture territory they have seized.

The significance of Crimea as a launching pad for Russian strikes on mainland Ukraine increased following the retreat of Russian forces a month ago from the city of Kherson -- the only regional capital they had captured since Moscow launched a large-scale invasion in February -- and the eastern bank of the Dnieper River in the surrounding area.

Russian forces have suffered numerous setbacks since the invasion but continue to hold parts of the Kherson, Zaporizhzhya, Luhansk, and Donetsk regions in addition to Crimea, which they occupied in 2014. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy has repeatedly said Kyiv's goal is to regain control over the entire country, including Crimea.



Russia places Crimea on total war footing – The Kremlin has placed Crimea in toto on a war footing which is causing panic among ordinary Russian citizens on the peninsula. Explosions are being registered across the island and once again Ukraine has not claimed any responsibility.

Ukraine cherry picks targets as Russia hammers the east - Russian forces shelled the entire line of contact and launched limited ground assaults in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Luhansk and Donetsk.

Russia claimed to be making limited gains, but these, said Ukraine’s general staff, came at a high cost in men and military materials, forcing Russia to delve into aged and unreliable weapons stocks.

Most of the Russian ground activity was focused on the towns of Bakhmut and Soledar in Donetsk, which encompass nodes of highways that could facilitate further expansion. Some Russian assaults came near Svatove, in Luhansk.

Separatist leader Denis Pushilin, head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, said Russian forces were advancing in the east.

“We see the advance of our units along the entire line of contact,” he said. “In some areas, this [advance] is 100-200 metres a day, and somewhere 10-20 metres are important if it improves the positions” of the units.

Russia’s defence ministry said on December 11 that offensives in Lyman in the northern Donetsk region had resulted in “more advantageous lines and positions” being taken.

War mappers have estimated that Russia has gained just a few square kilometres on the eastern front in three months.

Meanwhile, Ukraine did not remain on the defensive.

On December 9, said its general staff, 50 wounded Russian mercenaries were brought into Kadiivka hospital in the Luhansk region, evidence that an artillery rocket strike on a Wagner Group base had found its mark.

Russian defector says training consisted of being given a weapon, a target and 5,000 bullets. Going to the front line left many broken - A Russian defector who is now in Europe said his unit was given almost no training before it was sent to fight in Ukraine, which left soldiers broken after they experienced the front lines.

Nikita Chibrin told CNN that the training his unit received was just a commander giving soldiers a weapon, a target, and 5,000 bullets.

"No one was doing anything. There was no actual training," he said.

Chibrin told CNN that some of the men in his unit had bragged about how good they would be at fighting in Ukraine, saying they would be "like Rambo," but they were then broken when they came back from being deployed.

"Those who said they'd be shooting Ukrainians easily, when they come back from the front lines ... they could not even speak to me. They saw the war, they saw defeat, saw their [fellow] combatants being murdered, saw corpses."

Chibrin was sent to Ukraine early in the war, and reports suggest that Russia's training for many soldiers has only reduced since then, as it has had to call up reservists to fight.

Reports and intelligence assessments have suggested that Russia is giving only minimal training and poor equipment to many of its soldiers.

Chibrin said that he had initially refused to fight, but that his commander said he would go to jail and that his family would have "big problems" if he did not go.

His commander then attacked him, put him in a vehicle and closed the door. "And I couldn't open [it] from inside. So, that's how I went to Ukraine," he said.

Chibrin deserted the military in September. He is now requesting asylum in a European city, CNN reported, without naming his current whereabouts.

Chibrin told CNN that he was part of the 64th Separate Guards Motor Rifle Brigade, which has been linked to alleged war crimes in Bucha.

Ukraine drone supplier successfully flies unmanned 'supersonic' fighter jet - The Turkish company that supplied Ukraine with a critical type of drone in the war against Russia successfully completed the first flight of a new supersonic drone it describes as an "unmanned fighter jet."

Selçuk Bayraktar, the chairman of the board and the chief technology officer of Baykar, shared a video on Twitter Wednesday showing the new Kizilelma drone as it took flight for the first time.

"We could not keep it anymore on the ground. It flew! Thanks to our Lord," Bayraktar captioned the video.

First announced in July 2021, according to Aerotime, the Kizilelma appears to be a significant advancement from the Bayraktar TB2 drones that Ukraine has been using to fight off Russia's offensive. The TB2 drones are capable of flying up to 138 miles per hour, carrying payloads of up to 330 pounds and conducting intelligence, reconnaissance and armed missions, Newsweek previously reported. Ukraine has leveraged the drones to conduct devastating attacks against Russian targets.

Baykar asserts on its website that the Kizilelma UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle), which is still in the development phase, "will be a force to be reckoned with, specifically given its aggressive maneuvering capability and stealthiness against radar."

The drone has an operational altitude of 35,000 feet, a maximum takeoff weight of six tons and a 1,500-kilogram payload capacity. The UAV is projected to be able to fly for five hours and reach speeds of up to 500 mph. Additionally, it can take off and land completely autonomously, as well as take off and land on short-runway aircraft carriers, according to Baykar.

"The fast drone fighter jet Kizilelma is said to represent a significant expansion of capabilities for slow-moving reconnaissance and missile-carrying drones," the company wrote in a release last month announcing the successful completion of ground tests for the new UAV.

Russian soldiers run away from battle as Putin military struggles - Ukraine's military on Thursday shared a video that they said shows Russian soldiers fleeing Ukrainian forces.

The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine posted the clip on its Facebook page with a message that mocked the invading Russians. The video appears to show people running through a wooded area before explosions set off.

"The occupiers cannot hide from the Ukrainian paratroopers!" the caption from the General Staff read. "Frightened Russians rushed to run away from our defenders, but the attempt was unsuccessful... 'This is our land and enemies have no place here, we will get everyone,' assured the soldiers. Believe in the Armed Forces!"

Putin's long war is already here - Russia's military appears to be fully intent on "turn[ing] the conflict into a long-term armed confrontation aimed at exhausting Ukraine and our partners." That's what Ukrainian Army Brig. Gen. Oleksiy Gromov told reporters at a briefing Thursday. It's not a terribly new message; but it's one that Ukrainian leaders seem to sense needs to be repeated for the benefit of Ukraine's allies and partners. President Zelenskyy conveyed similar themes in his recent conversation with David Letterman for the latter's Netflix show.

"In the near term, the enemy's main efforts will be focused on the strategic task of establishing full control over the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine," Gromov said. That had been known previously, but we're now beginning to see more and more evidence that Russia is actively digging in across occupied territories in an effort to stop any ground offensives like the ones that won back regions surrounding Kharkiv and Kherson, to the east and the south. For example...

"Russian forces could most readily relaunch offensive operations along two main axes of advance in the coming months—along the Kharkiv-Luhansk border in northeastern Ukraine, or in Donetsk Oblast," analysts at the D.C.-based Institute for the Study of War wrote Wednesday evening. They believe this because "Russian troops appear to be moving heavy equipment from rear areas in Luhansk Oblast to areas near the current frontline along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and have reshaped and reconsolidated their force grouping along this line." What's more, "A recent drop in temperatures in this area to consistently below-freezing has allowed the ground to solidify, likely setting conditions for increasing the pace of offensive operations." Troops withdrawn from the Kherson capital could be used for just such an offensive, ISW warns.

Belarus - "Last week, one battalion of [Russian] tanks each was moved to [Belarus's] Obuz-Lesnovsky and Losvido training grounds," Gromov said Thursday. "This week, the enemy dropped three MiG-31K aircraft carrying Kinjal hypersonic missiles, as well as an A-50U long-range radar detection aircraft, at the Machulischy airfield," just south of Minsk. According to Gromov, this suggests Russia is planning to carry out more airstrikes on Ukraine from Belarussian soil. Still, he added, "the probability of the enemy conducting an offensive [ground] operation from the territory of the Republic of Belarus remains low."

Crimea region on all-out war footing - In a publicity gesture in November, Sergei Aksyonov -- the Russian-installed head of Ukraine's Crimea region -- visited frontline Russian forces on mainland Ukraine last month and delivered to them socks and other basic goods.

"I visited the region controlled by our warriors, once again bearing gifts," Aksyonov reported. "We brought two truckloads of essentials -- socks, clothes, medicine, generators, and so on. We also brought our defenders televisions."

Crimea -- which Russia has occupied since 2014 -- has been a key staging area for the Russian military since Moscow launched its massive invasion of Ukraine in February. Troops, weaponry, equipment, and supplies have been funneled through the peninsula over the Russian-built bridge that spans the Kerch Strait and by sea.

But in recent months, Moscow has ramped up efforts to mobilize the peninsula's resources in support of the war against Ukraine. In late October, Putin announced a heightened state of security for regions bordering Ukraine and for Crimea. Under Putin's order, occupation authorities in Crimea have expanded authority to "requisition civilian infrastructure to meet the needs of the armed forces," according to international security consultants Crisis24.

Virtually all the major enterprises on the peninsula are working under the occupation-authority slogan "For Russia's Victory," and increasingly small businesses and civilian organizations, including schools, are being harnessed to provide basic supplies to Russia's ill-equipped army. Shortly after Putin announced military mobilization in late September, the local offices of Russia's ruling United Russia political party began collecting supplies for the troops from Crimean civilians.

Putin

Putin faces pressure in Russia to end war with Ukraine - Putin is facing increasing pressure to broker an end to the ongoing war in Ukraine as a growing contingent of his country's citizens have begun to question the benefits of the war against the sizable losses experienced on the Russian side.

However, there appears to be very little support for the type of measures Ukrainian officials consider non-negotiable— including the surrender of territories Putin has sought to annex into Russia—that would need to be included in any potential ceasefire.

The findings, contained in polling by the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs and the Levada Center conducted late last month, help underscore not only the tangible impacts of Russia's frontline performance but also the influence of state media-driven narratives surrounding the war on the Russian public, which continues to support the country's "special military operation" in Ukraine by a roughly 3-to-1 margin.

"The Kremlin's tight control over traditional media sources continues to influence Russian support toward the military operation, especially among those who most trust television news, major print sources, and the radio," analysts for the Chicago Council wrote in a post announcing the findings. "Russians who trust these news sources are more likely to express strong support for the war than those who turn to more-independent outlets."

Developments

World leaders expected to push for Ukraine war crimes trials at Munich Security Conference - World leaders are expected to make a collective push for international efforts to prosecute the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Ukraine war when they gather at the Munich Security Conference in February.

This will be "high on the agenda" and not just for the conflict in Ukraine, said Ambassador Christoph Heusgen, who chairs the annual event in Germany.

“We have seen [Putin] responsible for tens if not [one] hundred thousand deaths, 40 million people have had to flee; we see what has happened in Ethiopia during the last year, 600,000 deaths; we see the conflict in Yemen continues,” Heusgen said in an interview. “We need to focus more on accountability, that the people responsible for the atrocities, for committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, that we see—how do we get them, you know, in front of courts? And this theme of accountability, in the country of the Nuremberg trial is the right place to do that. So I want to put the subject ‘how to prevent impunity’ high on the agenda.”

GPS signals are being disrupted in Russian cities - Every day, billions of people use the GPS satellite system to find their way around the world—but GPS signals are vulnerable. Jamming and spoofing attacks can cripple GPS connections entirely or make something appear in the wrong location, causing disruption and safety issues. Just ask Russia.

New data analysis reveals that multiple major Russian cities appear to have faced widespread GPS disruption during the past week. The signal interference follows Ukraine launching long-range drone attacks deep into Russian territory, and it may act as a way to potentially stop drones that rely upon GPS for navigation, experts say.

The GPS interference has “expanded on a scale that hasn't been seen before,” says Erik Kannike, a program manager at Estonian defense intelligence firm SensusQ who has been monitoring the situation. “What we're seeing now, since about a week ago, is GPS jamming bubbles covering hundreds if not thousands of kilometers around tactical cities.”

The GPS issues were first spotted by the monitoring system GPSJam, which uses data from planes to track problems with the satellite navigation system. The website has logged an increasing number of GPS disturbances in the Russian cities of Saratov, Volgograd, and Penza since the start of December. All of the cities are in western Russia and within hundreds of kilometers of the border with Ukraine.

On December 5, GPSJam logged a limited amount of GPS interference in Russia—the majority of registered interference took place around Moscow, where the Kremlin for years has tampered with GPS connections. However, since December 11, multiple areas of the country have faced GPS disruption, data gathered by GPSJam shows. In addition, wireless data analytics firm Aurora Insight measured an increase in GPS signal levels in the area at the start of December—a sign that potential GPS interference could have happened.

Impacts

Russian women struggle after men flee Ukraine-war draft - Hundreds of thousands of Russian men are reported to have fled the country since Moscow announced a "partial" mobilization in September. Many left family and loved ones behind. Their wives and partners have been left with the burden of raising a family alone, often without a strong support system or sufficient finances.

Sanctions

Russia's Asian oil flows show signs of wobbling after sanctions - There are tentative signs that key Russian oil exports from a port in Asia are dipping following G-7 sanctions targeting Moscow's petroleum revenues.

Since Dec. 5, buyers of cargoes from Russia have only been allowed to access industry standard insurance and an array of trade-critical services if they pay \$60 a barrel or less. Shipments of from the Asian port of Kozmino are about above \$10 above that, meaning they need to make alternative arrangements.

But there are signs they might be struggling to do that. In the 10 days since the measures began, 4.4 million barrels have been loaded onto tankers at Kozmino, tanker tracking compiled by Bloomberg shows. That's exactly half the month-ago level and there's nothing due to load Thursday.

The crude in question is called ESPO, which stands for the initials of the pipeline that takes the oil from east Siberia to the Pacific.

People involved in trading the grade said it's too soon to be confident that the observed drop in flows reflects something structural. However, weather conditions haven't been particularly bad and there don't appear to be many candidate ships in place to collect cargoes in the coming few weeks. Tanker tracking data are always volatile, depending on the timings of loadings, and the comings and goings of individual tankers.

Geopolitics

Bosnia formally granted EU candidate status as part of wider push for enlargement - EU leaders have confirmed candidate status for Bosnia-Herzegovina, putting the Balkan country at the start of what is expected to be a long and complex process toward membership.

Tensions in north Kosovo - Tensions in Serb-populated northern Kosovo – a flashpoint in the Western Balkans for decades – have risen in recent weeks.

On December 10, a stun grenade was thrown at a reconnaissance patrol from the European Union's rule of law mission in Kosovo. There have also been exchanges of fire between the local police and unknown groups.

The EU has warned that failure to resolve such friction risks bringing Serbia and Kosovo back to their violent past.

Many ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo are angry about the arrest of a former Serb policeman accused of playing a role in attacks against Kosovo police.

He was one of about 600 Kosovo Serbs who resigned from the police force last month in protest of Pristina, declaring that members of Kosovo's Serb minority would need to exchange Serbian license tags predating the war with Republic of Kosovo ones.

Although now resolved through a Brussels-brokered deal, this year's bureaucratic dispute over license plates heightened tensions between the Pristina government on one side and both Kosovo Serbs and Belgrade on the other.

The deployment of ethnic Albanian police to northern Kosovo amid unrest resulting from that dispute drove many Kosovo Serbs to establish roadblocks in North Mitrovica.

The scheduling of local elections in four northern municipalities for this month has exacerbated friction, too.

Kosovo's dominant Serb political party decided to boycott them. On December 10, Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani announced the postponement of these elections until April 2023 – a move welcomed by Western governments, which call for these roadblocks to be taken down immediately.

Serbian troops

Citing United Nations Resolution 1244 (PDF), officials in Belgrade warned that Serbia might send up to 1,000 security forces to their "homeland" in northern Kosovo.

President Aleksandar Vucic said that he would ask for NATO's permission for this deployment as part of an effort to defuse tension in Kosovo's restive north.

Yet, Vucic acknowledges the low probability of the NATO-led international peacekeeping force (KFOR) granting such permission.

Meanwhile, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti on Monday called for KFOR's intervention to prevent "criminal gangs" from denying "freedom of movement" amid these roadblocks.

Talk of deploying Serbian security forces is "deeply worrisome and does risk of course the outbreak of serious violence," Matthew Bryza, the former United States ambassador to Azerbaijan.

"I am sure that the President of Serbia will keep [KFOR's presence] in mind as he considers what sort of military steps – as unwise as they would be – he may be contemplating in northern Kosovo."

KFOR peacekeepers have played a critical role in maintaining the peace between Pristina and Belgrade, as well as Kosovo's government and the country's Serb minority, which makes up six percent of Kosovo's population.

Belgrade has depended on these 4,000 NATO troops to protect Kosovo's Serb minority while Pristina relies on KFOR to prevent Serbian forces from entering Kosovo. The leadership in Belgrade understands that any conflict with KFOR would not end well for Serbia.

Ukraine factor

The Russian invasion of Ukraine aggravated fractures in the Balkans and deepened the Belgrade-Pristina divide.

"The Ukraine war has demonstrated the difficulty of constructing a democratic, multiethnic federal state, especially one with an irredentist neighbour that continues to eye territory of that new state," John Feffer, the director of Foreign Policy in Focus, said.

"Ethnic Serbs in Kosovo know that they have an uncertain status in a country that has not been universally recognised. So, much is up in the air."

Belgrade and Pristina's decades-long negotiations and US and EU-led efforts to persuade Serbia to recognise Kosovo's independence in exchange for EU membership have been "put in doubt because of the aggressiveness of ethnic Serbs that has grown since Russia invaded Ukraine, with of course Russia being the strongest friend of the Serbian population," according to Bryza.

The former US ambassador explained that actions taken by Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik such as military parades reflect such aggression on the part of Moscow-backed Serb politicians in the Western Balkans.

Fearful of Russia's clout in the Western Balkans in the post-February 24 period, Kosovo is more determined to gain NATO membership. Earlier this year, Osmani accused the Kremlin of having a "destructive interest in our region" which includes "attacking Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to some extent also Montenegro."

Yet, four NATO members – Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain – not recognizing Kosovo's independence makes the idea of the country joining the transatlantic alliance impractical, at least for now.

Moscow's agenda

Even without a revival of the 1998-99 Kosovo War, continuing tensions serve Moscow's agenda of capitalizing on political, social and ethnic fractures in the Western Balkans to create trouble for Brussels and Washington.

"I am sure that the Russians are very happy and encouraging Serbia to take the stance that it is at the moment because clearly it is in its interests to try and make trouble in another part of the continent and distract Western attention from Ukraine," Tim Judah, a special correspondent for The Economist magazine, told Al Jazeera.

Nuclear

Russia in new nuclear threat to West by readying missile capable of striking UK and US - Today Russia put in place its nuclear threat against the West by showily readying a Yars strategic missile for combat use, at a location southwest of Moscow.

A video shows the installation of the enormous rocket into a silo at the Kozelsk military compound in the Kaluga region.

In late October, Vladimir Putin was spotted overseeing the launch of a similar Yars nuclear missile on a mock attack on the West amid high tension in the war with Ukraine.

Russia is building up to more nuclear showboating in preparation for the annual Strategic Missiles Forces Day on December 17.

The Yars intercontinental ballistic missile with a 7,500 mile range was installed in a silo launch pad using a special transport and loading unit.



It took several hours for the "complicated technological operations" to be installed.

The division commander Col. Alexei Sokolov explained that the exercise was meant to send a message to the West, as both the US and the UK were within range.

He said: "The importance of this operation lies in the fact that the next missile will be put on combat duty on schedule.

"The homeland will get another nuclear missile weapon, which will make it possible to solve any tasks at the strategic level."

Combat engineer Vadim Vyazovsky told TV Zvezda, the Russian defence ministry's own channel: "I feel proud of Russia that my country is putting such products into service so that the Motherland can sleep well."

According to reports the Kozelsk missile is undergoing modernisation and a revamp.

Humanitarian

The invasion of Ukraine is causing a massive humanitarian crisis. The war has displaced the most refugees in Europe since World War II. To date, 5.6 million have fled Ukraine, and another 7.7 million have left home and sought shelter elsewhere in the country.

All told, the war has pushed nearly 30 percent of Ukrainians out of their homes which represents the second largest humanitarian crisis since the 1960s in terms of number of people who have fled or been displaced, and fifth in terms of fraction of the population this represents. And it could get worse: the UN estimates that 8.3 million Ukrainians could be refugees by the end of the year.

Ukrainian refugees have considerably increased the population of host countries.

Ukrainian refugees, Feb 24–May 1



Internally displaced people in Ukraine, Feb 24–Apr 21

