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**Poland pledges help to refugees and wounded from Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 24, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 308 words

**Body**

Poland has pledged help to ***Ukraine***, promising to take in war ***refugees*** and take care of the wounded after Russian armed forces began an assault in the early hours of February 24.

Poland is expected to be Ukrainian war ***refugees***' natural choice for fleeing war. The Polish government said in early February that Poland was getting ready to house even up to one million people.

Crossings on the Ukrainian-Polish border were relatively quiet in the morning and afternoon following the outbreak of the war.

"We do not see an influx of ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** at the moment, the border crossings are functioning as usual," ***Ukraine***'s ambassador to Poland Andriy Deshchytsa told the Polish state newswire PAP.

There were reports, however, of people beginning to cross into Poland, pushed out by the escalating conflict. Polish media reported about a train from Kyiv - which set out the previous evening - arriving in Warsaw with Ukrainians who decided to leave their capital early.

The independent Belarusian TV Belsat also reported that some Ukrainians were going into Poland via the crossing point in Medyka, 85 kilometres from Lviv, ***Ukraine***'s seventh-largest city.

As Russian forces began the attack at dawn on Thursday, Poland stepped up preparations for helping what observers say will be an inevitable reality of thousands of ***refugees*** seeking safety.

The government plans to open nine so-called reception centres close to Poland's border crossings with ***Ukraine***, the Polish home affairs ministry said.

Poland's Ministry of Health also said that it would launch a train to transport any wounded people from the border to one of 120 hospitals tasked with helping the victims of Russian aggression.

The number of the victims is "in the hundreds", Kyiv's Mayor Vitaliy Klichko said, according to a tweet by former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

**Load-Date:** February 25, 2022

**End of Document**

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**Slovak PM says Slovakia ready to help all refugees**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 24, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 516 words

**Body**

The Slovak government led by Prime Minister Eduard Heger (OLaNO party) condemned Thursday's action taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin against ***Ukraine***. He also confirmed that Slovakia is ready to provide assistance to people fleeing the war in ***Ukraine***.

"Russia has attacked the weaker, whose only fault is that it wanted to live peacefully according to its own ideas like other sovereign nations," Heger wrote on his Facebook profile, adding that ***Ukraine*** has all rights to defend itself and Slovakia in cooperation with Nato and the EU will help ***Ukraine***.

"The government assures the citizens of Slovakia that, along with its Nato allies, it will take all necessary steps to foil the war that has hit our neighbour," stated Heger, as quoted by the Slovak News Agency.

He also called on Slovaks not to succumb to disinformation, to remain calm and to keep a cool head when it comes to the situation in ***Ukraine***. "A lot of misinformation is being spread in the information space, trying to justify the activities of the Russian Federation. We are also seeing attempts to question our membership of the EU and Nato and thus undermine our own security. Please beware of misinformation that seeks to confuse, frighten and alarm you," he told Slovak citizens.

Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korcok confirmed that Nato plans to strengthen its eastern borders in the form of its forward presence (under which Nato troops have been operating in the Baltic States). "We have given our consent to start such planning steps, which are inevitable to do for the defence of the alliance territory and the Slovak Republic," Korcok said, as quoted by iDnes.cz, adding that a detailed proposal would be submitted to the government and parliament to approve it.

Heger said that there's a need to be aware of the power of the Nato alliance: "It's not about the power of Slovakia, but the power of Nato," he said, as quoted by the news agency, stressing that the military power of Nato is immense and that Slovakia is safe and secure under its protection.

The PM also said that the Slovak armed forces and the police will ensure that borders are crossed in a controlled manner and that Ukrainian ***refugees*** will be provided support. "It can be said almost with certainty that Russian aggression will drive many Ukrainians from their country, let's show compassion and understanding for them," the PM was quoted as saying by the Slovak News Agency.

"Slovakia will diligently observe the principles of humaneness and solidarity, just as they were observed by others when our parents or grandparents were fleeing war and the invasion of our country," Heger added.

According to Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad, the eastern border with ***Ukraine*** should be militarily reinforced, thus Slovakia will send 1,500 troops to its eastern border. According to the latest data, the current waiting time at the Slovak-Ukrainian border at Vysne Nemecke/Uzhgorod reached five hours. The Slovak Interior Ministry said that entry to Slovakia from ***Ukraine*** would be allowed even for persons who do not carry a valid travel document.

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**Bulgaria to accommodate more than 4,000 refuges from Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 24, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 586 words

**Body**

Bulgaria has received more than 4,000 requests for refuge from Bulgarians living in ***Ukraine*** just in a few hours, and will arrange their safe transportation to the country, President Rumen Radev said on February 24 after an emergency meeting with top officials. Radev also condemned the war started by Russia.

"A full-scale conventional operation of the Russian Federation is underway ... This is absolutely unacceptable - in the 21st century in Europe to pour bombers, missiles and strike on a sovereign country," Radev said at a press briefing live broadcasted by Dnevnik news outlet.

He added that currently there is no direct military threat to Bulgaria but the country is facing a number of risks.

Sofia is almost completely dependent on Russia for natural gas supplies. Radev said that the authorities are seeking alternative routes for supply of natural gas, oil, food and other basic goods.

"Bulgaria will work actively for its defence within Nato, in the system for national and collective security," Radev, who was commander of the Bulgarian air force before being elected president, said.

He added that the country will host all Ukrainians seeking refuge.

"I want to address all Bulgarians in ***Ukraine***, as well as all Ukrainian citizens who wish to seek a refuge in Bulgaria - we are open. We shall do anything for them to be transported in a safe way to Bulgaria and to get all the necessary aid here," Radev said.

Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said that a top priority now is to help all Bulgarians living in ***Ukraine*** to safely leave the country. The government is organising their transportation, the processing of data and accommodation in hotels and other facilities in Bulgaria. It is also working on plans related to the energy risks.

"We strongly condemn the actions of the Russian Federation. This is unacceptable," Petkov said.

Bulgaria's foreign ministry gave a significantly lower number of people seeking refuge from ***Ukraine*** - slightly over 100. It said in a statement that the country's diplomatic representatives in Moldova, Romania and Poland were ordered to go to the borders and assist Bulgarians living in ***Ukraine*** who want to leave the country.

Petkov said subsequently that the government is opening three points where ***migrants*** from ***Ukraine*** will be accepted. Transport Minister Nikolai Sabev is arranging buses to transport them and is also seeking options for flights from Poland.

At the same time, Bulgaria's Defence Minister Stefan Yanev earned widespread disapproval with his statement that one must not rush into using the word `war' for the Russian invasion and that Russia's President Vladimir Putin avoids using it too.

"If we start with the analysis of Putin's words, he avoids the word `war'. We are using it frivolously but in the coming days probably the thesis that the Russian military actions will be limited within a military operation will be confirmed. Or at least Putin and his military staff are explaining in this way what they are doing," Yanev said in an interview for bTV.

His statement unlocked a wave of anger and people called for his dismissal, including sending emails to the government.

Yanev, who was caretaker prime minister for two consecutive mandates and is a brigadier general, has made controversial statements related to the Russian gathering of troops near ***Ukraine*** in the last few months too.

Meanwhile, unknown supporters of Russia laid flower wreaths on a monument of the Soviet army in Sofia, which sparked shame and anger among people.

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**Refugees start to flee from Ukraine to neighbouring countries**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 25, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 1871 words

**Body**

***Ukraine***'s neighbours are preparing for the arrival of a wave of ***refugees*** following the Russian invasion of the country in the early hours of February 24. There are already reports of Ukrainians crossing the borders into Moldova, Poland, Romania and other countries.

Neighbouring countries as well as those further away such as the Baltic states have already said they are ready to accommodate hundreds of thousands of ***refugees*** in total.

bne IntelliNews' correspondent in Kyiv, Cameron Jones, reported by telephone on the morning of February 24 that people were fleeing the capital in large numbers after attacks began at 5am local time.

Locals told bne IntelliNews that some Ukrainians are hoping to cross the border to neighbouring Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Leaving by plane is not possible after flights were cancelled following reported drone strikes on all of the airports in the country. Others have decided to stay put and wait for further developments as Russian bombings across several areas of ***Ukraine*** indicate nowhere in the country can be considered safe.

Moldova reports first ***refugee*** arrivals

Moldova confirmed around 1,900 people had entered from ***Ukraine*** as of the morning of February 24, and several thousand more were reported later in the day.

Moldova plans to keep its borders with ***Ukraine*** open and to accommodate ***refugees***. Before both Moldova and ***Ukraine*** closed their airspace over safety concerns, planeloads of people arrived in Chisinau from ***Ukraine***.

"At the border crossing points with ***Ukraine*** there is an increase in transit flow, our institutions are installing sorting centres. We will help people who need our support. At the moment, we are ready to accommodate tens of thousands of people. At the same time, the government is in constant contact with international organisations and we have prepared several scenarios in case we have a larger influx of ***refugees***," President Maia Sandu said at a briefing on February 24.

"We are carefully monitoring the evolution of the situation in the country and in the region. We are in contact with the authorities in neighbouring states and with other external partners. In this context, my request to citizens is that we should all be understanding and ready to help each other."

Minister of Internal Affairs Ana Revenco also gave a briefing on the morning of February 24, at which she announced that as of 11am around 1,900 Ukrainian citizens, including some entire families, had registered as crossing the border.

"At the moment, the focus is on managing the risk of a larger influx of ***migrants*** registered at the border of the Republic of Moldova. In this regard, the situation plan on managing the flow of ***migrants*** has already been activated," Revenco said, according to a ministry statement.

"[A]dditional forces have already been deployed at several border crossing points to streamline the influx of people," she added.

"It has also been ordered to set up Temporary ***Migrant*** Sorting Centres, adjacent to border crossing points, so that the process of crossing and managing the flow is easy and respectful of the needs and requirements of these citizens."

Romania prepares to host up to 500,000 ***refugees***

Romanian Minister of Defence Vasile Dincu announced on February 22 that the country is preparing to receive up to 500,000 ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** in case of an invasion by Russia. Romania has a 600-km long border with ***Ukraine*** in the northeast of the country.

"There are several estimates, but we could receive over 500,000 ***refugees***, that is ... the number for which we have prepared alongside the interior ministry and other institutions," Dincu told reporters, Reuters reported.

"There is a plan prepared for all large cities, there are areas for this near the borders."

As the situation became increasingly tense earlier in the month, Interior Minister Lucian Bode previously announced that the government was drawing up a plan including temporary mobile camps in northeast Romania.

After a meeting with top officials on February 24, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev said his country will host Ukrainians seeking refuge.

"I want to address all Bulgarians in ***Ukraine***, as well as all Ukrainian citizens who wish to seek a refuge in Bulgaria - we are open. We shall do anything for them to be transported in a safe way to Bulgaria and to get all the necessary aid here," Radev said.

Countries in the region have also urged their own citizens to return home from ***Ukraine***. Bulgaria has received more than 4,000 requests for refuge from Bulgarians living in ***Ukraine*** in just in a few hours and will arrange their safe transportation to the country, Radev said on February 24. Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said that a top priority now is to help all Bulgarians living in ***Ukraine*** to safely leave the country. The government is organising their transportation, the processing of data and accommodation in hotels and other facilities in Bulgaria.

Polish border quiet but many ***refugees*** expected

Crossings on the Ukrainian-Polish border were relatively quiet in the morning and afternoon of February 24 following the outbreak of the war. There were reports, however, of people beginning to cross into Poland, pushed out by the escalating conflict. Polish media reported about a train from Kyiv - which set out the previous evening - arriving in Warsaw with Ukrainians who decided to leave their capital early.

"We do not see an influx of ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** at the moment, the border crossings are functioning as usual," ***Ukraine***'s ambassador to Poland Andriy Deshchytsa told the Polish state newswire PAP.

The independent Belarusian TV Belsat also reported that some Ukrainians were going into Poland via the crossing point in Medyka, 85 kilometres from Lviv, ***Ukraine***'s seventh-largest city.

As Russian forces began the attack at dawn on Thursday, Poland stepped up preparations for helping what observers say will be an inevitable reality of thousands of ***refugees*** seeking safety.

The government plans to open nine so-called reception centres close to Poland's border crossings with ***Ukraine***, the Polish home affairs ministry said.

Poland's Ministry of Health also said that it would launch a train to transport any wounded people from the border to one of 120 hospitals tasked with helping the victims of Russian aggression.

Slovakia ready to help all ***refugees***

The Slovak government led by Prime Minister Eduard Heger condemned Thursday's action taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin against ***Ukraine***. He also confirmed that Slovakia is ready to provide assistance to people fleeing the war in ***Ukraine***.

"Russia has attacked the weaker, whose only fault is that it wanted to live peacefully according to its own ideas like other sovereign nations," Heger wrote on his Facebook profile, adding that ***Ukraine*** has all rights to defend itself and Slovakia in cooperation with Nato and the EU will help ***Ukraine***.

The PM also said that the Slovak armed forces and the police will ensure that borders are crossed in a controlled manner and that Ukrainian ***refugees*** will be provided support. "It can be said almost with certainty that Russian aggression will drive many Ukrainians from their country, let's show compassion and understanding for them," the PM was quoted as saying by the Slovak News Agency.

"Slovakia will diligently observe the principles of humaneness and solidarity, just as they were observed by others when our parents or grandparents were fleeing war and the invasion of our country," Heger added.

According to Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad, the eastern border with ***Ukraine*** should be militarily reinforced, thus Slovakia will send 1,500 troops to its eastern border. According to the latest data, the current waiting time at the Slovak-Ukrainian border at Vysne Nemecke/Uzhgorod reached five hours. The Slovak interior ministry said that entry to Slovakia from ***Ukraine*** would be allowed even for persons who do not carry a valid travel document.

In Hungary, the authorities, churches, and charity groups are preparing for the flood of ***refugees***. Traffic has jammed up at the half dozen border crossings on the 130km long border with ***Ukraine***, with a waiting time of one to two hours, according to police reports from late afternoon.

Baltic states to welcome ***refugees***

On February 23, hours before Russia's military attack against ***Ukraine***, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said its government "would welcome" Ukrainian ***refugees*** fleeing war.

Lithuanian Interior Minister Agne Bilotaite also said earlier the day that the country's authorities were preparing to take in ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** if needed.

"It would be difficult to speak about specific numbers, but we are...modelling different scenarios and situations...We understand that one way or another, our state has to be prepared, whether it is 3,000 or more than 30,000 people," the minister told Lithuanian media.

The interior ministry has sent out inquiries to municipalities, asking them where they could accommodate ***refugees*** and how they could provide them with various services and assistance, according to Bilotaite. Non-governmental organisations are also involved in preparation works, she added.

Meanwhile, Lithuania's Deputy Interior Minister Vitalij Dmitrijev has said that Lithuania is prepared to accept around 8,000 ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine***.

"The municipalities could accept 6,000 ***refugees***. The education ministry said it could accommodate another couple of thousand people. So, we have a total of around 8,000 places," Dmitrijev told reporters on Tuesday, February 22.

According to him, such a number of ***refugees*** could be accommodated in various municipal and ministerial premises. In his words, Lithuanian municipalities have offered various types of premises for accommodating potential ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine***.

In total, Lithuania could accept up to 50,000 ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** if there was such a need, he added. If the number of ***refugees*** increased drastically, all municipalities in the country would have to contribute to accommodating Ukrainians, who "would be spread proportionally", according to the deputy interior minister.

The Lithuanian education, science and sport ministry announced on February 24 it is collecting information on available accommodation as part of preparations for a potential influx of ***refugees*** after Russia launched a military operation in ***Ukraine***.

"We have sent out inquiries to all educational institutions about available premises suitable for accommodation, such as dormitories and empty buildings," Education Minister Jurgita Siugzdiniene said.

In Latvia, a plan for the reception and accommodation of ***refugees***, developed by the Ministry of the Interior, foresees accepting up to 20,000 Ukrainian ***refugees***.

Interior Minister Maria Golubeva said that the plan provided for accommodation, distribution of basic necessities, as well as vaccination against COVID-19 and testing, with arrivals accommodated in hotels and guesthouses in coordination with municipal authorities.

Local governments are also ready to provide assistance to ***Ukraine***, the Latvian Association of Local Governments pointed out.

Contributions from bne IntelliNews correspondents in Central and Southeast Europe.

**Load-Date:** February 25, 2022

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**Lithuania braces for influx of Ukrainian refugees**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 25, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 409 words

**Body**

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"We have sent out inquiries to all educational institutions about available premises suitable for accommodation, such as dormitories and empty buildings," Education Minister Jurgita Siugzdiniene said.

President Gitanas Nauseda called Russia's actions "unprovoked military aggression" and swiftly signed a decree on a state of emergency in Lithuania.

**Load-Date:** February 25, 2022

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**Ukraine fighting for all of Europe, Poland's PM Morawiecki says**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 25, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 442 words

**Body**

***Ukraine*** is fighting not just for its own independence but for freedom for all of Europe, Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said during a special parliamentary session devoted to Russia's waging war on ***Ukraine*** on February 24.

Poland has found itself with a war on its doorstep following the attack of the Russian military on targets across ***Ukraine***, including the western cities of Lutsk or Ivano-Frankivsk, located within a couple of hours' drive from the Polish border.

There was disquiet in Warsaw after the news about the war broke, with queues for the filling stations and a rally of several thousand in front of the Russian embassy.

Poland's stock market was no exception in Europe, as its main index, the WIG, fell by 10.73% as trading closed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange. The sub-index WIG-***Ukraine***, grouping eight Ukrainian companies - the biggest ones being agricultural firms Kernel, IM Company, and Astarta - crashed 37.44%.

"This barbarism beyond our eastern border must be met with resistance from the entire free world. ***Ukraine*** is fighting not only for its own independence, ***Ukraine*** is fighting for freedom of all Europe," Morawiecki said.

"Today Europe's naivety, which has led to this sort of consent to aggression, is coming to an end," Morawiecki also said.

Poland said earlier during the day that it would prepare infrastructure to house as many ***refugees*** as possible. Warsaw also pledged help to the wounded by tasking 120 hospitals across the country to provide treatment.

Poland's border crossings with ***Ukraine*** were relatively quiet on February 24 as the Border Guard and the military anticipated a surge. There were some Ukrainians crossing but most were just passing through in their cars, according to Polish media. Ukrainian citizens can travel to the EU visa-free.

There already are around 1.5mn Ukrainians in Poland who have come there in search of better jobs. Many have settled in Poland for good and are sending their children to Polish schools.

Later during the day, Morawiecki flew to Brussels for an extraordinary meeting of the EU heads of states and government, where he reiterated that the bloc must hit Russia with "massive sanctions."

"Enough of this cheap talking. Civilians are being killed now - every minute, every hour," Morawiecki told the media as he arrived, POLITICO Europe reported.

"We're buying lots of Russian gas, lots of Russian oil, and President Putin is taking the money from us and he's turning this into aggression. We have to stop it," the Polish PM added.

Poland is one of the EU countries that has long been dependent on Russian oil and gas, and, more recently, even coal.

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**Latvia suspends visas for Russians, ambassador to Russia will be recalled for consultations**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 25, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 270 words

**Body**

In an extraordinary cabinet meeting, Latvia's government on February 24 decided, among other things, to stop issuing visas for Russian citizens and to recall its ambassador to Russia for consultations.

Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins said that contingency plans for dealing with various situations had been prepared for a long time. A plan for the reception and accommodation of ***refugees***, developed by the Ministry of the Interior, foresees accepting up to 20,000 Ukrainian ***refugees***.

Asked whether there are plans to declare a state of emergency in Latvia, as has been done in Lithuania, Karins replied: "As far as I know, Lithuania has declared a state of emergency to facilitate decisions regarding future ***refugees***. In Latvia, hopefully, within a day the Saeima (Latvian parliament) could approve these measures. It will regulate legally what is planned quite clearly," he said, in which case a formal state of emergency would not be necessary.

Interior minister Maria Golubeva said that the plan provided for accommodation, distribution of basic necessities, as well as vaccination against COVID-19 and testing, with arrivals accommodated in hotels and guesthouses in coordination with municipal authorities.

Local governments are also ready to provide assistance to ***Ukraine***, the Latvian Association of Local Governments pointed out.

Separately, foreign minister Edgars Rinkevics said that the Latvian ambassador to Russia, Maris Riekstins, will be recalled for consultations, and the issuance of travel visas to Russian citizens will be suspended, except in cases related to special humanitarian considerations.

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**100,000 Ukrainian refugees have fled war to Poland so far**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 26, 2022 Saturday

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**Length:** 248 words

**Body**

The number of Ukrainians seeking safety in Poland after Russia waged war on their country has exceeded 100,000 since the start of the conflict two days ago, the Polish government said on February 26.

Poland said that it would receive any number of ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine***, requiring almost no formalities at the border crossings. Ukrainians, who can travel visa-free to Poland the EU anyway, can cross the Polish border with no documents after which they are directed to one of nine reception centres and other facilities readied by local authorities as well as ordinary Poles.

"Yesterday ... officers cleared over 47,000 people to Poland. We will help everyone, we will not leave anyone without help," the Polish Border Guard said on Twitter.

Dozens of grassroot initiatives have also sprung up in recent days aiming at providing ***refugees*** with food, clothing, or medicines. Crowd-funding efforts to help ***refugees*** as well as people remaining in ***Ukraine*** are also proliferating.

Polish railways granted ***refugees*** free of charge travel on popular train categories in the next four weeks.

***Ukraine***'s other Nato neighbours - Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania - have also eased their border controls to allow ***refugees***.

The Polish government said earlier this year that in the event of a war it would get ready to take in even up to one million ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine***. Most recent, but unofficial, estimates reported by the Polish media say that the number could be between one and five million.

**Load-Date:** February 28, 2022

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**Bulgaria closes sky for Russian planes, limits internet traffic from 45,000 addresses**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 27, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 565 words

**Body**

Bulgaria's transport ministry said on February 25 the country is closing its sky for Russian planes as of February 26 due to the war in ***Ukraine***, while at the same time the government took steps to limit the hybrid attacks in the country, restricting access to more than 45,000 internet addresses.

The country does not allow any Russia-registered air company to land its planes or to cross the country's air space, including above its territorial waters, the transport ministry said in the statement.

In return, Russia banned the access of Bulgarian planes to its territory. Flights from Bulgaria can be carried out only after special permission from the Russian foreign ministry or the federal agency for control of air transport, Dnevnik news outlet reported. Transit flights above Russia are also banned.

At the same time, Bulgaria stopped the traffic from 45,000 web addresses, from which it has established malicious attempts at intervention in electronic systems or networks, the E-Government Ministry said in a statement published on the website of state news agency BTA on February 27.

The authorities have sent information to telecommunications companies and those providing public information or communication networks in the country to filter or stop the malicious internet traffic, the statement reads.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria's Defence Minister Stefan Yanev has been target of mounting requests to resign after he repeatedly refused to admit that the Russian invasion of ***Ukraine*** is a war.

On February 24, Yanev said that this was called a "special operation" by Russia's President Vladimir Putin and that the authorities should stick to this term instead of using the word "war" for the invasion.

In an interview with public broadcaster BNT, Yanev said the following day that there was no Nato or EU document calling the situation war and that the use of words describing the situation must be very precise and specific.

Although one of the members of the ruling coalition - Democratic Bulgaria - is also calling for Yanev's resignation, parliament speaker Nikola Minchev said this was not part of the current agenda as it could lead to a collapse of the coalition.

However, Minchev also said, as quoted by Dnevnik news outlet on February 27, that Bulgaria will no longer take a balanced position between Moscow and the West, but will "firmly stand" on the side of the West "where it belongs".

Minchev also said that the country will secure humanitarian aid to ***Ukraine***.

Bulgaria has opened its borders to refuges and on February 26 the first two buses organised by the government arrived in the country. More buses are expected in the following days. Foreign Minister Teodora Genchovska said that the authorities are seeking a corridor to take Bulgarians living in ***Ukraine*** out of the country.

NGOs and individuals have organised to also help the ***refugees***, either securing transportation from the borders, or food, medicines and accommodation.

At the same time, the government has asked hotel owners for offers to accommodate refuges from ***Ukraine***. The parliament has given a green light to the government to spend money to secure free accommodation for refuges and to provide what is necessary for their basic needs.

The extra spending would come from buffers in the budget for 2022 that was adopted on February 26 by parliament. It was proposed by the ruling coalition.

**Load-Date:** February 28, 2022

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**Russians and Ukrainians in Sofia unite in fear, grief and anger**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 27, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 876 words

**Body**

War has divided their countries but Russians and Ukrainians gathered outside the Russian embassy in Sofia on the day of the Russian invasion, alongside local Bulgarians, were united in shock, fear and anger. The thousands gathered there shouted with one voice: "Shame on Putin!" and "No to war".

In the days since then, many Bulgarians have expressed their support for Kyiv and their willingness to help in any way they can. They are also fearful for themselves, after some concerning comments from Russian officials that sparked fear the conflict could spread.

Within the crowd, a young woman, holding her eight-year-old son, cannot stop crying. She is from ***Ukraine*** and has relatives there with whom she has lost contact.

Another young woman from ***Ukraine***, Tonya, 28, says most of her family is near Mariupol and cannot escape.

"They [the Russians] are coming from everywhere, there is no escape anymore. We still have contact with them, I don't know for how long. They have prepared the basements [to hide in there] and that's it," she says.

Her mother had arrived in Sofia few weeks ago to visit her, but the rest of her family is stuck in ***Ukraine***.

"We have only our prayers left," Tonya says.

My dad will die

11-year-old L., living in Sofia, says his father went to ***Ukraine*** to fight for his country. His grandmother has coronavirus and is hiding in a bunker.

"I know that my dad will die there," he tells his friends from school.

L. does not believe he will ever see any of his relatives in ***Ukraine*** again.

"No child should live with this horror," nine-year-old Nina, friend of L., says. "We are supposed to be safe, aren't we? I wish to go and tell that man [Putin] to stop this madness," she continues.

Shame and sorrow

"I have never been more ashamed of being Russian. I want to tear apart my Russian passport, even if that would mean to remain without any document. I want to cry. He is insane," 34-year-old K.J., a Russian married to Bulgarian, tells bne IntelliNews.

She has two sons and is afraid to send them to school, fearing they might become targets of violence or bullying due to the war.

And even worse, she is afraid that her own safety and that of her husband, who is Bulgarian but a loud critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, is not guaranteed even in Bulgaria.

"Russians have lists of inconvenient Bulgarians. My husband must be on one as he does not keep his mouth shut," she says.

Help for ***refugees***

Bulgaria has opened its borders to ***refugees*** and on February 26 the first two buses organised by the government arrived in the country. More buses are expected in the following days. Foreign Minister Teodora Genchovska said that the authorities are seeking a corridor to take Bulgarians living in ***Ukraine*** out of the country.

Meanwhile, ordinary Bulgarians have been helping Ukrainians in any way they can - sending money, aid, or information on how they can reach Bulgaria.

Although the Bulgarian government declared that it will organise transport and accommodation for Bulgarians living in ***Ukraine***, as well as for Ukrainian refuges, many report they cannot find shelter. A Facebook group of people willing to help the refuges was quickly formed and people are offering rooms, houses, apartments, or just sofas. Clothes, food and transportation from the border with Romania are also offered.

But not everyone has condemned the Russian aggression in ***Ukraine***. Bulgarians are ashamed of the lack of unity and decisiveness among politicians. Parliament debated for hours on a declaration condemning the invasion and two parties - the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which is part of the ruling coalition, and far-right Vazrazhdane - refused to back it.

Moreover, supporters of Putin laid flowers on a monument of the Soviet army.

"I am ashamed! How can people be so blind," Mariyana, a 47-year-old ski-instructor, said.

Daniela, 45, says she has lost sleep and feels like crying all the time.

"But my tears are inside of me, I cannot cry them out because my children will be frightened," she tells bne IntelliNews.

Fear for the future

Daniela and her friends are wondering whether they need to prepare for war in Bulgaria and whether they need to have emergency bags ready just in case. Like many adults, they have been trying to come up with survival plans, while at the same time wondering how to talk to their children about the war, which is so close to their country.

Many people fear that the war could expand and reach Bulgaria, or that there could be other consequences such as skyrocketing inflation that would change their families' lives for the worse.

These fears were fuelled by a February 25 statement from Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, who said Moscow objects to the neo-Nazi Lukov march that took place in Sofia earlier in February. Her statement that this was unacceptable to Moscow was compared with Putin's claims that Nazis are ruling ***Ukraine***, one of the pretexts for the Russian invasion.

Fear of radiation spreading from Chernobyl - site of the world's worst nuclear disaster that was taken by Russian forces shortly after the invasion - is also spreading and some people are considering buying devices to measure radiation levels, as well as first aid kits.

**Load-Date:** February 28, 2022

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**Hungary backs EU proposal to cut off Russia from SWIFT, but is not planning to scrap €12.5bn nuclear plant deal**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 28, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 822 words

**Body**

Initially, a handful of countries, including Germany, Italy, Cyprus and Hungary, objected to cutting off Russia from SWIFT. Budapest has since joined the EU consensus after Germany jumped on board, local media write.

Hungary remains in a precarious situation as it relies heavily on cheap Russian gas. Budapest has become Moscow's most loyal ally in the EU since Orban took power in 2010. He defends cosy ties with Russia, saying Hungary needs long-term gas contracts that offer lower prices in order to maintain the cap on retail gas prices.

Under a renewed long-term gas contract, signed last September, Hungary is getting 4.5 bcm a year from Gazprom, including 3.5 bcm delivered from the south, through Hungary's interconnector with Serbia, and 1 bcm via the pipeline running from Austria.

The surge in energy prices is making the central price-fixing of gas a costly game. Since October, the gap between the retail and wholesale price of gas  for household users is close to €2.2bn. Further increases in global prices would widen the budget gap.

Hungary's illiberal strongman, who copied Russia's anti-NGO law amongst others, has been reluctant to call the invasion aggression but has aligned Hungary with the EU stance on the sovereignty of ***Ukraine*** and supporting sanctions.

The condemnation of Moscow's aggression was left to President Janos Ader, whose mandate expires in May. He strongly denounced the Russian attack on ***Ukraine***, as one of the largest military operations seen in Europe since WWII, but Hungary was also forced to endure a similar one in 1956, the president's office cited Ader as saying at a meeting of the heads of state of the Bucharest Nine (B9) group in Warsaw on Friday.

Over the weekend, Hungary's diplomacy also made a push for the conflicting sides to sit down for peace talks in Budapest, but experts see little chance of that taking place in the Hungarian capital.

In his first television interview since the conflict began on February 27, Orban stressed that Hungary must stay out of this military conflict, "because for us the most important thing is the security of the Hungarian people". The deployment of troops or military equipment to ***Ukraine*** is out of the question.

Backing up his argument, he said Hungary won't give weapons to ***Ukraine***, because "with those weapons, they could shoot at Hungarians living in Transcarpathia".

This came a day after Russians killed an ethnic Hungarian serving in ***Ukraine***'s navy.

When asked about sanctions, Orban reiterated that he is against sanctions, but "there is war now, and now is not the time to be smart but to be united".

He noted that energy issues, including the expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant (Paks II), must be left out of the sanctions list.

Hungary's opposition called for the government to scrap the €12.5bn project, financed largely by Russian loans. The government has been tight-lipped about the future of the largest investment in Hungary on record, but analysts warned that with Vnyesekonombank (VEB) on the EU's sanctions list, the financing of the project would be in danger.

Green MEP Benedek Javor, a long-time opponent of the nuclear expansion, said that the government should acknowledge that the project is dead given the future possible ban on technological transfer in addition to rising financing costs. The cutting off of Russian banks from the SWIFT system will also hurt VEB, which is financing the €10bn loan.

The main constructor of the project, Rosatom, has failed to receive the final permit for building two 1,200MW blocks at Paks, which accounts for half of the country's electricity production, for failing to meet safety standards. The €12.5bn investment is five to six years behind schedule.

The operator of the nuclear plant said "fuel supply is assured and security of supply is guaranteed for the long-run", although it did not specify.

The Russian invasion has caught Hungarian officials by surprise. Authorities were ill-prepared for the influx of ***refugees*** on the first days of the conflict, unlike in Slovakia and Poland, where humanitarian assistance was available immediately on the spot.

By Sunday, authorities began to shift resources to eastern border towns near ***Ukraine***, setting up shelters and offering healthcare services to people crossing the border. Charities, NGOs and local governments assisted ***refugees*** in the first days, but state help was nowhere to be seen.

By Sunday, more than 70,000 Ukrainians entered Hungary, most of them ethnic Hungarians from the western part of the country.

A government decree published on Friday allowed Ukrainian nationals as well as citizens of other countries lawfully residing in ***Ukraine*** to submit applications for asylum in Hungary. Only a handful of people sought asylum.

Ukrainian officials were not letting men aged 18-60 enter Hungary, although that has varied greatly depending on whether they held a Hungarian passport.

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**Slovakia considers expelling Russian diplomats**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 28, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 340 words

**Body**

Slovakia is considering expelling Russian diplomats from its territory, said Prime Minister Eduard Heger, adding that consultations with European counterparts are underway, the Slovak News Agency reported.

"We won't hesitate. All it comes down to is the timing, so as to send a clear and strong signal to put a stop to this aggression," said Heger, as quoted by the news agency. The country also decided to join other European countries and ban Russian flights from Slovakia's airspace.

According to the Slovak President Zuzana Caputova, the time has come for the EU to grant membership prospects to ***Ukraine***. "The Slovaks have proven their European choice in a long and bumpy accession process. The Ukrainians have chosen their European course long ago and we must finally respond: the time to grant ***Ukraine*** an EU membership perspective is now," the president was quoted by the news agency as saying.

On Sunday, additionally to the €11mn already approved by the government a day earlier, Slovakia decided to provide ***Ukraine*** with materiel worth €4.41mn, based on Kiev´s request for the specific materiel in question. "I asked [President Zelenskiy] what more Slovakia could do to help. Ukrainian soldiers are starting to run out of ammunition and hence I immediately convened the government on Sunday to respond to such a request without delay," said Heger.

Due to the mass influx of Ukrainian ***refugees*** to Slovakia, the government declared an emergency state in the country. Based on data provided by the interior ministry, a total of 7,490 Ukrainian citizens crossed the Slovak-Ukrainian border between February 23 to February 25,

"We enable persons fleeing the war a short-term stay of up to 90 days. However, these persons have a possibility to apply for international protection after they enter Slovakia or even later. As soon as an amendment to the Asylum law and the respective government decision are approved, they will also be able to request a temporary refuge status," said the ministry, according to the new agency.

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**First Ukrainian refugees arrived in Slovenia**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 28, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 142 words

**Body**

The first ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** are coming to Slovenia, Defence Minister Matej Tonin was cited by news agency STA on February 28, adding that ten of them had already arrived in the country.

Slovenian Interior Minister Ales Hojs was cited as saying a day earlier that Slovenia has the capacity to accommodate between 180,000 and 200,000 ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine***.

Tonin said in the statement that Slovenia would help ***Ukraine*** with material, military and humanitarian aid.

Slovenia has already sent material aid in the form of helmets, weapons and ammunition. Many civil society organisations are also collecting humanitarian aid for ***Ukraine*** and the ***refugees*** from the country, Tonin said.

"During the crisis in ***Ukraine***, we are paying attention to the Western Balkans and the EU will send additional troops there," he added after meeting his EU colleagues.

**Load-Date:** March 1, 2022

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**Lithuanian municipalities cut ties with partner cities in Russia, Belarus**

Intellinews - Russia Today

February 28, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 117 words

**Body**

A number of Lithuanian municipalities are cutting their ties with partner cities in Belarus and Russia in response to Russia's military aggression in ***Ukraine***, LRT.lt, the website of the Lithuanian national broadcaster LRT, reported on February 28.

The municipalities that have already decided to cut ties or plan to do so include Vilnius, Kedainiai, Ukmerge, Kaunas, Panevezys, Kazla Ruda, Jonava District, Vilkaviskis District, and Alytus.

"I wrote to them [the Russian and Belarusian cities] last week, urging them to do something, but, of course, there was silence," Vilnius mayor Remigijus Simasius said.

Meanwhile, Kaunas Mayor Visvaldas Matijosaitis said the city was ready to accept war ***refugees***.

**Load-Date:** March 1, 2022

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**Ukraine accuses Russia of "undisguised terror" after bombing of Kharkiv Freedom Square**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 1, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 291 words

**Body**

Russian forces bombed the central square of ***Ukraine***'s second-largest city, Kharkiv, on the morning of March 1.

The attack on Freedom Square, the cultural heart of Kharkiv, hit the opera house, concert hall and government buildings, killing 10 civilians and injuring 35, according to local authorities.

The day before, peace talks took place between ***Ukraine*** and Russia on the Belarus-***Ukraine*** border, during which Russian forces allegedly used cluster bombs on Kharkiv. 11 people died in the attack.

Freedom Square after the attack, from Twitter

***Ukraine*** has accused Russia of committing war crimes and targeting civilian areas.

"This is terror against ***Ukraine***. There were no military targets in the square - nor are they in those residential districts of Kharkiv which come under rocket artillery fire," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said in a press conference after the attack.

He condemned Russia as a terrorist state, saying "launching a rocket at the central square of Kharkiv is an outright, undisguised terror."

However, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu claims that Russia is only attacking "military targets and exclusively with high-precision weapons", despite evidence proving otherwise.

The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Karim Khan, announced that possible Russian war crimes will be investigated.

Zelenskiy also spoke against Russia's membership of the UN Security Council on February 28: "A state that commits war crimes against civilians can't be a member of the UN Security Council. Such a state can't have access to all ports, canals, airports in the world."

Over 660,000 people have fled ***Ukraine*** since the invasion began last week, according to the UN ***refugee*** agency.

**Load-Date:** March 2, 2022

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**TotalEnergies to remain in Russia despite Ukrainian invasion**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 1, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 448 words

**Body**

French oil major TotalEnergies has said it intends to stay put in Russia despite Moscow's invasion of ***Ukraine***, although it has said it will not invest in any new projects in the country.

TotalEnergies has shown greater restraint in its response to events in ***Ukraine*** than its European peers BP, Equinor and Shell, which have all said they intend to exit Russia's oil and gas industry altogether.

In a press release on March 1, TotalEnergies was clear in its opposition to Moscow's actions, stating that it "condemns Russia's military aggression against ***Ukraine***, which has tragic consequences for the population and threatens Europe." It also said it expressed "solidarity with the Ukrainian people who are suffering with consequences and with the Russian people who will also suffer the consequences."

TotalEnergies added it would provide fuel to the Ukrainian authorities and aid to Ukrainian ***refugees*** in Europe, while complying with the sweeping sanctions that Europe has slapped on Russia in recent days, which it said that it would support.

TotalEnergies alongside BP are considered to be the international oil companies (IOCs) most entrenched in Russia. The former's main asset is a 19.4% stake in Russia's top LNG exporter Novatek. It is also a minority shareholder in Novatek's operational Yamal LNG plant, and its Arctic LNG-2 project, due to come online in 2023. In addition, it is partnered with Novatek at the Terneftegas gas fields and holds a share in the Zarubezhneft-operated Kharyaga oilfield.

Earlier on March 1 French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire told local radio that a decision on TotalEnergies' continued involvement in Russia would be made within days, noting that there was a "question of principles."

Yet TotalEnergies was previously non-committal about scaling back its business in Russia. On February 24, the day that Moscow launched its invasion of ***Ukraine***, CEO Patrick Pouyanne said he was "convinced the Russians don't want to use gas as a weapon in the dispute."

"We recently took a stance against Myanmar. We exited Myanmar, but people were criticising us - why didn't we do it immediately," he said at a conference. "But you know in life you need to take time [to see] what exactly will happen.  I think it is premature to make this type of conclusion."

At the start of the year, TotalEnergies' holding in Novatek was worth $13.1bn, but the impact of the invasion on the ruble and Russian stocks means it is now valued at a mere $2.1bn, according to analysts at Morningstar. The holding accounts for around 5% of TotalEnergies global oil and 30% of its gas production, and over the past three years, it has generated 7% of its operating cash flow.

**Load-Date:** March 2, 2022

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**Chaos in Kyiv as escape routes close**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 1, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 1036 words

**Body**

It has been nearly 80 years since Kyiv was last consumed by fighting, when the Red Army liberated the city from three years of Nazi rule.

Now, a Russian army is again approaching from the north and east. But it is coming to conquer, not to liberate.

This is the situation now faced by ***Ukraine***'s capital, as the civilians remaining in the city scramble to flee or seek shelter as the Russian noose closes.

The city has been in a tightening state of siege since the war's first day. When Russia began its invasion of ***Ukraine*** last Thursday, a wave of cruise missile strikes at dawn forced daily life to a halt almost immediately.

The next day, the situation worsened with the entrance of Russian special forces into the capital, searching for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy in gun battles that echoed throughout the city's streets. That was followed by yet more missile strikes later that night.

By the weekend, Kyiv had become a city of bunkers. The streets were almost empty, populated mostly by Ukrainian militiamen armed with Kalashnikovs and ready to do battle with Russian saboteurs roaming the capital. Unlike the first two nights, the city's shelters now sport a half-dozen armed volunteers at the entrance to each - a testament to the threat posed by plainclothes Russian agents.

Staying is becoming increasingly untenable, as Russian armour closes in. But fleeing, too, is not easy.

Last Saturday morning, after the overnight curfew ended, the heavy metal doors blocking the entrance to the metro station shelter were opened, and the Territorial Defence soldiers allowed civilians through. Most dashed out, hoping at least to reach their homes to grab supplies before the next air raid siren rang.

Others headed to the one reliable route out: the train station. Getting a taxi to the station is difficult, and requires both personal connections and negotiation skills. Taking one out of the city is impossible: The drivers say that not only are the few remaining roads open to the south clogged with traffic and checkpoints, but that petrol is now in short supply as well.

At the station, chaos reigned. A crush of civilians attempting to board whatever train is heading east made even pushing through the crowd difficult. Many at the station were trying to reach Lviv, ***Ukraine***'s westernmost major city, in order then to flee to the Polish border and onwards to safety. But few trains are going that far, leaving most to settle for any other westerly destination they can find.

One such target is Khmelnitsky. As a train bearing that name pulls up to the platform, civilians scrambled on board, quickly filling all available space. Seats were crammed with extra occupants and aisles were packed with even more passengers; even the toilets hosted a few travellers. The odour of densely packed humanity lay heavily over the carriage.

When the train finally pulled away, there was an audible sigh of relief from those aboard. The threat of being trapped in the capital, an unwilling witness to the urban warfare to come, seemed to have finally passed.

The passengers were a snapshot of Kyiv's cosmopolitan society: people from all walks of life who had been thrust together by undiscriminating fate.

Olesya, 26, is a designer in her daily life. She moved to Kyiv from the central city of Dnipro a few years ago.

"I'm lucky, to be honest," she says. "I'm still young, and I've got plenty of money to be able to afford to run from this city. I can handle some time at the border or in another country."

She, like many others, has plenty of family left behind.

"My parents won't leave," Olesya says. "My dad insists that he will kill any Russian soldier who tries to come into our house. Of course I'm worried for them, but what can I do? They are from that generation, they won't budge," she says.

Others on the train include foreigners, ***immigrants*** to ***Ukraine***.

"I came here about four years ago," says Ali, a history student from Iran. "I applied to a programme in Canada, but I didn't get in, so this was the more reasonable option. At least it's closer to home," he says.

His friend, Mo, is busy sharing Iranian dried fruit snacks with fellow passengers.

"We have a small shop here too, selling products from Iran," he says. "It wasn't a ton of money, but it made enough to pay for our rent. I hope it's still there when we come back," he says.

Their chances of getting across the border and into Poland are not as clear as the others.

"You know we have lots of problems with visas for Europe, because of politics," Ali says. "I hope we'll be able to get in [to Poland]. Our embassy couldn't tell us if it'd be possible," he says.

The exodus has been massive. Just five days into the war, the UN has reported that half a million Ukrainians have fled to neighbouring countries, with more than half of those heading to Poland.

Some Ukrainians, meanwhile, have stiffened their resolve over the last few days and now want to stay.

Hanna, a 29-year old fitness instructor and blogger, is a minor celebrity owing to her many Instagram followers. She recounts a story of being recognised by one of them the previous night at the bomb shelter.

"My parents are already in Poland, so I'm hoping to join them there," she says. "I have a friend in Khmelnitsky that I can stay with, and in Lviv too. So I can take my time if the border is crazy," Hanna says.

Her plans would change, though. A day after arriving, having watched the innumerable videos of other Ukrainian citizens joining civil defence brigades or preparing supplies, she decided to stay in ***Ukraine***. "I can go to Poland later," she says. "I'm going to make Molotov cocktails here [in Lviv] now, like everyone else is doing."

There are now indications that Lviv, too, may not be safe forever. The past two days, air raid sirens have sounded in the evening, warning of missile attacks that have yet to come. Belarus, too, is gearing up to enter the war on Russia's side, with huge columns of Belarusian troops spotted on the country's south-west border with ***Ukraine***, about 200 km north of Lviv.

For now, though, western ***Ukraine*** remains a safe haven. For those still in Kyiv, meanwhile, they may have a lot of war still to see.

**Load-Date:** March 2, 2022

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**North Macedonia won't send troops to Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 1, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 165 words

**Body**

No decision has been made to send North Macedonia's troops to ***Ukraine***, and no such decision will be made in future, Defence Minister Slavjanka Petrovska said on March 1.

North Macedonia, which is the last country that joined Nato, has condemned Russian attacks on ***Ukraine*** and joined the EU sanctions against Moscow.

Petrovska said that the country will send military equipment to the war-stricken country in line with Ukrainian requirements, but did not specify what kind of equipment will be shipped, saying that it is classified information, Sitel reported.

Petrovska noted that the capacity of North Macedonia's army won't be diminished by this donation.

Petrovska said that so far, there are no announcements on the arrival of Ukrainian ***refugees***, but the country will be ready to receive them.

A day earlier, the government in Skopje decided to join the comprehensive support of Nato allies and EU partners and will donate military equipment and supplies to the Ukrainian armed forces.

**Load-Date:** March 2, 2022

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**Czech government introduces state of emergency due to Russia´s invasion of Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 3, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 205 words

**Body**

The Czech government has declared a state of emergency to be effective from March 4 (for the next 30 days), in order to provide more effective care for ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** invaded by the Russian army, confirmed  Prime Minister Petr Fiala after a government meeting. So far, a total of 20,000 Ukrainian ***refugees*** have arrived in the Czech Republic.

Fiala said in the Chamber of Deputies that the government is working on legislative amendments to ease the bureaucracy process on the labour market for Ukrainians. Ukrainian citizens will not need any working permit.

As a state of emergency has been repeatedly declared in the Czech Republic over the past two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Czech citizens are very sceptical about it. Therefore, Fiala assured that a state of emergency will have no impact on Czech citizens. It will primarily allow the regional governments to better engage all human and material resources in helping ***refugees***, added Czech Interior Minister Vít Rakusan.

Czech humanitarian organisations have already raised over CZK1bn to help ***Ukraine***. The members of the lower house will on Friday address a shift of CZK1.8bn in the state budget for support to Ukrainian ***refugees*** and Ukrainian authorities.

**Load-Date:** March 4, 2022

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**North Macedonia's parliament adopts declaration in support of Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 3, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 257 words

**Body**

North Macedonia's parliament adopted a declaration on March 3 condemning the Russian military attacks on ***Ukraine*** that threaten the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country.

Russia launched attacks on ***Ukraine*** on February 24. On March 3 Ukrainian and Russian delegations held the second round of talks in an attempt to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

"The unprovoked Russian aggression against ***Ukraine*** is a blatant violation of international law and thus endangers the European security system and the peace of the continent," MP Maja Moracanin from the green party DOM was cited by Plusinfo.mk.

100 MPs voted in favour of the resolution and three were against in the 120-seat parliament. Two of MPs who voted against are from the Left party and the third is from the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia (DPSM).

"We respect the right of ***Ukraine***, like any sovereign state, to decide about its internal order and its international priorities. We urge the relevant institutions to be in close coordination with Nato and EU members and to support diplomatic efforts for an immediate and unconditional cessation of hostilities in ***Ukraine***," Moracanin, one of MPs who submitted the declaration, said.

The government in Skopje decided to join the comprehensive support of Nato allies and EU partners and will donate military equipment and supplies to the Ukrainian armed forces, but will not send Macedonian troops to ***Ukraine***.

It has already launched preparations to receive ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** fleeing the Russian invasion.

**Load-Date:** March 4, 2022

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**Former Moldovan PM says if Russia occupies Odesa next target is Transnistria**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 3, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 547 words

**Body**

The tipping point for what currently is seen as a more or less stable situation in Moldova would be the occupation of the Ukrainian port of Odesa on the Black Sea by Russia, former Moldovan prime minister Ion Sturza commented on March 2.

The next step after Odesa is setting up a corridor towards Transnistria in Moldova, Sturza claimed. Transnistria, which lies between the eastern bank of the Dniester river and Moldova's border with ***Ukraine***, has been controlled by Russian-backed separatists since the early 1990s.

On the evening of March 2, US media reported, citing military sources, that Russian warships have been seen heading from Crimea towards Odesa. This indicates it could be Russia's next target on ***Ukraine***'s Black Sea coast after Kherson and Mariupol.

"In terms of military security, Moldovans are on their own and have no resources or ability to defend themselves. We have a well-trained Russian army in Transnistria. In case Odesa and Tiraspol fall, the Russians will reach only 50 km from Chisinau and only the Dniester will separate us," Sturza declared during the ZF Live business show.

Moldova's position is highly vulnerable, he warned - in contrast with the reassurances from the Moldovan authorities.

Both Moldovan President Maia Sandu and European Commission High Representative Josep Borrell said during a joint press conference in Chisinau on March 2 that there is no risk of the war in ***Ukraine*** expanding to Moldova.

"It is a complicated situation, but as I said before: there are no premises at the moment to believe that this military action, this war, will reach the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The authorities are doing everything they can to ensure security and peace in the future," said Sandu.

"Instability close to the national borders can always be problematic, but we don't think there is a risk that the war itself will spread to your territory. The biggest concern is the flow of ***refugees***, so matters that are not related to military actions," said Borrell.

Sandu has condemned the military aggression of the Russian Federation in ***Ukraine***. But she also defended the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicu Popescu, who stressed that Moldova will not join the group of countries enforcing sanctions against Russia as it simply cannot afford to do so.

"There are many reasons [not to join the sanctions], including the fact that our society, our economy, our energy system are too vulnerable to make it difficult for the Republic of Moldova in such positions, which involve costs," said Popescu on February 28.

Earlier this week, President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko appeared to have given away Russia's invasion plan on live TV, with the footage going viral on social media.

At a conference with members of the Security Council and top officials of the Council of Ministers on March 1, Lukashenko stood in front of a map of ***Ukraine*** which appears to show military facilities destroyed by missiles from Belarus, attack directions and ***Ukraine*** divided into four sectors.

Twitter users were quick to point out that Moldova appears to be included in Russia's invasion plans, prompting fears that the small republic would also be dragged into the war, as a red arrow pointing from Odesa leads into Transnistria.

**Load-Date:** March 3, 2022

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**Caught between a rock and a hard place: Africans fleeing the war in Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 3, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 565 words

**Body**

Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine*** is going to affect us all, even if we do not or cannot comprehend it yet. Thousands of African students and workers found themselves trying to flee ***Ukraine*** as the country was engulfed in a brutal war.

On February 25, the first reports emerged about Africans being turned away from the Polish border (Medyka-Shehuni). Having spent the whole day in a half-a-kilometre-long queue, they were told to go back and join the end of the queue again. The reason? They did not have a Ukrainian passport, so Polish immigration authorities could not process and issue their visas. In desperation, many turned to social media.

Dark Skin Women (@darkskinwomen) posted on Instagram: "Africans are stuck at the Poland-Ukrainian border. Let them out! Appeal for humanitarian aid organisations and Ukrainian government to address this issue and help Africans and POC (editor note: people of colour) leave ***Ukraine*** immediately."

International humanitarian agencies questioned the border control authorities. Polish officials quickly issued a statement permitting foreigners fleeing ***Ukraine*** to stay in Poland for up to 15 days without visas or the need to present a valid COVID-19 test certificate.

On February 28, the situation worsened. More ***refugees*** were trying to flee Kyiv and Kharkiv, and other places where fighting had escalated and shelling had intensified. Videos were circulated on social media platforms of black people being thrown off trains by Ukrainian train conductors, while white people were being allowed to board.

Political figures soon became involved. Senegalese President Macky Sall, the current chairman of the African Union,, and Moussa Faki Mahamat, the African Union Commission Chairperson, said in a joint statement: "Reports that Africans are singled out for unacceptable dissimilar treatment would be shockingly racist and in breach of international law."

Nomzamo Mbatha, a South African actress and a Goodwill ambassador, posted on her Instagram account: "You cannot express solidarity with the suffering of Ukrainian citizens without acknowledging the reports of anti-Black racism being reported by Africans seeking refuge from war."

That quote belongs to Amanda Faun, an anti-racist educator, who said on her page: "My expectation is that anyone sharing about the humanitarian crisis in ***Ukraine*** will also be willing to share about the ways in which African citizens are being discriminated against as they are attempting to flee the ongoing conflict." (@arborandwood) "Even in times of conflict we cannot allow anti-Blackness to go unchecked," she added.

A South African human rights activist and lawyer, Siphiwe Ntombela, commented: "It has certainly been disheartening to learn of reports detailing mistreatment of African citizens in the ***Ukraine***-Russia conflict. There should be no place for such violations of human rights of African people where we should be promoting human dignity for all."

South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Namibia and individual home affairs offices have subsequently each published guidelines for their citizens stranded in ***Ukraine*** on how to be urgently assisted in light of the perceived bias against them. Nigeria has announced immediate plans to evacuate about 2,000 of its citizens who managed to escape to neighbouring countries. The fate of African students and workers still stuck in ***Ukraine*** remains uncertain.

**Load-Date:** March 4, 2022

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**British retailer Marks & Spencer's plan to pull out of Russia frustrated by deal with Turkish franchise group FiBA**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 4, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 208 words

**Body**

British retailer Marks & Spencer (M&S) is finding it difficult to extricate itself from Russia given that the 28 outlets it has in the country are operated by Turkish franchise business FiBA Group.

M&S is attempting to withdraw from Russia in response to the Russian invasion of ***Ukraine***, but Turkey and Turkish firms have not generally joined in with the wave of boycotts and other action taken against Moscow by European, US and other companies. Ankara, citing regional "national interests", is attempting to maintain good political and economic relations with both Russia and ***Ukraine*** amid the unfolding conflict.

A franchise deal giving FiBA the rights to operate M&S stores in Russia was signed in 1999. The BBC reported on March 4 that it understood M&S was in ongoing talks with FiBA, but as things stood the stores would continue to operate in Russia.

M&S, meanwhile, has suspended shipments to FiBA's Russian business due to "the unfolding humanitarian crisis following the invasion of ***Ukraine***".

It is not clear what will happen to the M&S stores in Russia once FiBA's existing stock is sold.

M&S added that is has donated £1.5m in support for the UN ***Refugee*** Agency and UNICEF including donating 20,000 coats and thermals for families.

**Load-Date:** March 7, 2022

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**Poland detains alleged Russian GRU agent at border town**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 4, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 241 words

**Body**

Poland detained and arrested for three months a Spanish citizen of Russian origin who the Polish counterintelligence agency ABW said was identified as an agent of the GRU, the Russia military intelligence service, ABW said on March 4.

Poland's eastern regions bordering with ***Ukraine*** are under the BRAVO alert level due to the influx of war ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** since Russia's attack at the dawn of February 24. To date, as many as 706,000 ***refugees*** crossed the border, the Polish Border Guard said in its latest update - nearly 60,000 on March 4 by 3pm alone.

Poland is also sending military and humanitarian aid over the border. It also is a hub for Ukrainian men wanting to return to fight against Russia.

The detained man posed a journalist, ABW said in a statement.

"During his stay in Poland, he obtained information the use of which by the Russian secret services could have a direct negative impact on the internal and external security and defence of our country," ABW also said.

Before his arrest, the suspect planned to travel to ***Ukraine*** in order to continue his activities, the counterintelligence agency added.

The alleged GRU agent was detained in Przemysl, a rail border crossing from ***Ukraine***, and - along with the nearby road crossing in Medyka - the biggest entry point for ***refugees*** in Poland so far.

Poland's prosecution charged the man with espionage, a crime that is sanctioned with up to 10 years in prison in Poland.

**Load-Date:** March 7, 2022

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**Second round of Russia, Ukraine peace talks ends with no progress, assault on Kyiv looms**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 4, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 1334 words

**Body**

A second round of peace talks between Russia and ***Ukraine*** concluded on March 3 with no progress. According to reports, that means an assault by the Russian forces on Kyiv has become much more likely.

The two sides met in the Brest region of Belarus on the Ukrainian border to continue negotiations, but the respective positions remain wide apart, according to reports from the meeting.

"To our great regret, we did not get the results we were counting on," Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said.

There is still some time to find a compromise. Both sides said will meet for the third round of negotiations "probably in the nearest time."

Both sides said they wanted a possible ceasefire for evacuating civilians through humanitarian corridors.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had said prior to the meeting that Moscow was ready for talks to end the fighting in ***Ukraine*** but would continue to press its effort to destroy ***Ukraine***'s military infrastructure.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said his country was ready for talks to resume, but added that Russia's demands had not changed and he would not accept any ultimatums.

The Kremlin called for peace talks over the weekend and the first round was held on February 28, where the Kremlin laid out its demands, but ended inconclusively.

The Kremlin produced a shopping list of demands, many of which will be unacceptable to Kyiv, including recognition of Russia's hold on Crimea. While the Kremlin has asked Kyiv to declare neutrality and Kyiv responded that it was "open to the idea," also on the list of demands is that ***Ukraine*** "denazify", "demilitarise", recognise the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and recognise Russia's ownership of Crimea.

The ***Ukraine*** delegation said that it would not concede to any compromises unless Russia first implemented a ceasefire and withdrew its forces. Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an attack on ***Ukraine*** on February 24 and since then the Russian army has been occupying the regions along the north and east of the country as well as launching missile strikes at multiple cities and towns across ***Ukraine***.

The UN reported this week that more than 1mn Ukrainians have been displaced, most of which have gone west to try to cross the border into the EU. Poland reports that it has already received more than 600,000 ***refugees***, many of which have friends and family in Poland. The migration is the largest since World War II.

The failure of the second round of talks bodes ill and suggests that a full-scale assault on Kyiv could be imminent. As bne IntelliNews has reported in an op-ed "game of chicken", Putin has been increasing the threats incrementally to try to put Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy into a position where he has no choice but to concede to Russia's demands.

Zelenskiy looked tired and stressed at a press conference given to the international media on March 3. He lambasted the West for not going far enough to guarantee ***Ukraine***'s security, although he said he was grateful for the western support in the form of weapons and sanctions. However, he called for the West to "close the skies" above ***Ukraine***, clearly fearing a large-scale aerial attack that may come at any moment.

"If you can't close the sky now, then give a deadline when it will happen. If you can't do it now, tell me how many people have to explode, how many arms, legs, heads have to fly to reach you? Tell me how many. I'll go to count and wait for this moment," Zelenskiy told reporters.

At each stage Putin has turned the pressure up dramatically but then called for a pause to hold talks and present his demands. So far there have been two rounds of diplomacy, the first with the US that started with a meeting on January 10 in Geneva that came to nothing when the US turned down Putin's demand for legal guarantees that ***Ukraine*** would never join Nato in a letter delivered at the end of that month. A second round of diplomacy led by French President Emmanuel Macron in February that focused on implementing the Minsk 2 agreements also failed at the end of that month.

The third round is currently being played out, where Putin has brought the army into play. However, despite the destruction caused by the rockets, the fighting has been relatively low key so far, with some 250 Ukrainian civilians reported dead and just under 500 dead Russian combatants and with just over 1,500 wounded, according to unconfirmed official estimates.

Once again, the Kremlin was quick to call for a pause after only week following the start of the military operations. If these talks fail then Putin is likely to go to a fourth and much more destructive phase where ***Ukraine***'s capital could be stormed.

A large military convoy is in place about 40 km north of Kyiv threatening the city. Special battle-hardened Chechen fighters have also been brought in and deployed in ***Ukraine*** near Kyiv, according to bne IntelliNews' correspondent on the ground, Neil Hauer.

"It is unknown how many soldiers Kadyrov has sent to ***Ukraine***, but the number is significant. Most reports indicate approximately 10,000 have been deployed; the highest figures range up to (a highly improbable) 70,000. More are being actively recruited, too: A source in Grozny provided a video on February 25 that shows thousands of men being gathered and equipped for duty in ***Ukraine***. Audio recordings of conversations between Kadyrov and other Russian officials reveal that the Chechen ruler was one of the few figures made aware of Putin's plans for a full-scale invasion in the run-up to the event," Hauer reports.

"Already, Kadyrov's forces have played a key role in the offensive. Chechen Rosgvardiya (National Guard) troops were spotted north of Kyiv on February 27, trudging through the Chernobyl nuclear exclusion zone toward the Ukrainian capital. Other sources suggested their involvement in the assault on Kyiv's western suburbs and the crucial Hostomel Airport in fighting following the Russian paratrooper landing there on the first day of the war," Hauer added.

The threat of an assault on the Ukrainian capital is palpable and may be given the go-ahead if Putin believes that the talks taking place on the Belarusian border are going to go nowhere. So far the Kremlin has been patient.

Putin told Macron in a phone conversation over the weekend that Kyiv has to concede to the Kremlin's demands made at the talks and if it didn't, "We will take them militarily."

"Russia's offensive in ***Ukraine*** could intensify further in the coming several days as its forces target key Ukrainian cities," consultant Teneo said in a note. "If the advancement of Russia's armed forces stalls, the Kremlin might resort to more extreme measures to achieve its objectives."

Following a few days of regrouping and resupplying, Russian forces are intensifying the offensive in ***Ukraine*** along multiple axes, Teneo reports. Their progress is most notable in southern ***Ukraine***, where the city of Kherson (population around 300,000) has now fallen under Russian control. This paves the way for Russian movement towards Mykolayiv (500,000) and Odesa (1mn). The control of these cities and surrounding areas would essentially block ***Ukraine***'s access to the Black Sea coast, with the ensuing economic and strategic consequences for ***Ukraine***.

"In the capital Kyiv and the second-largest city Kharkiv, Russian forces are resorting to increasingly heavier air and artillery strikes, causing significant civilian casualties and damages. Heavy bombardment and attempts to encircle Kyiv will likely persist in the coming days. In the meantime, the Ukrainian side intends to step up its counter-offensive operations, likely reinforced by new deliveries of military equipment from the West," Teneo adds.

As both sides prepare for intensified military action in the coming days, Russia and ***Ukraine*** reportedly agreed to open the humanitarian corridors for the evacuation of civilians on March 3.

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**Ukraine's militant anarchists ask for international help against Russian invasion**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 5, 2022 Saturday

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**Length:** 403 words

**Body**

Ukrainian anarchists, left-wing ultras and anti-fascist groups have publicly called for help in the fight against the Russian invasion on social media.

The announcement came after Russian troops captured their first city, Kherson, in southern ***Ukraine***, on March 2.

The Twitter account @bad\_***immigrant*** posted a photo of a collection of left-wing groups holding AK-74s, AKS-74U carbines and a possible RPK-74 LMG.

The tweet included an email address where willing volunteers should send an introduction letter about who they are and why they want to fight.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy previously stated ***Ukraine*** is open to foreign volunteer fighters. "***Ukraine*** is already greeting foreign volunteers. (The) first 16,000 are already on their way to protect freedom and life for us, and for all," he said on March 3.

Although the number of international anarchists joining the war is unknown, groups across Europe have expressed support for ***Ukraine***, including Russian anarchists, condemning what they deem as Russian imperialism and authoritarianism.

Ukrainian anarchists called for international actions outside Russian embassies, with anarchist-led protests taking place in Berlin, Ankara, Stockholm, Warsaw and Prague last week.

***Ukraine***'s most prominent militant anarchist group, RevDia, announced on the day of the Russian invasion that they will be fighting. In their statement, they said that while they are small, they want to do anything to "step on the neck of Putin", according to journalist Jake Hanrahan.

Anarchist militias have been incorporated into ***Ukraine***'s Territorial Defence Forces under the banner of the Resistance Committee, reported Militant Wire.

Although RevDia initially stood apart from the Resistance Committee, they eventually joined on February 28.

Polish left-wing groups are reportedly providing aid to ***refugees*** crossing the border.

One group, No Border, provides information via Telegram on safe border crossings, particularly for non-white citizens who have faced discrimination from Ukrainian and Polish police and guards.

***Ukraine*** has a rich history of anarchism, shaped by revolutionary leader Nestor Makhno, who led the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of ***Ukraine*** during the Russian Civil War.

A stateless anarchist society called the Free Territory existed in large parts of east and southeast ***Ukraine*** from 1918 to 1921. Around 7mn people lived in the territory.

**Load-Date:** March 7, 2022

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**Putin tells Scholz either Ukraine must concede or we will enforce our demands militarily**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 5, 2022 Saturday

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**Length:** 1489 words

**Body**

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz talked with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the phone on March 4 for an hour and called for an immediate end to all military actions. Scholz also called on Putin to allow access for humanitarian aid in areas where fighting was taking place.

The Russian president said a third round of Russia-***Ukraine*** talks could happen over the weekend, but said his demands remained the same: Kyiv should recognise the Crimea is Russian territory; that Donetsk and Luhansk regions are now independent from ***Ukraine***; and that ***Ukraine*** should declare neutrality.

The call was initiated by Berlin and Putin told Scholz that Russia was "open" to talks with Kyiv if all his demands were met. Russia is "open to dialogue with the Ukrainian side, as well as with all those who want peace in ***Ukraine***. But on condition that all Russian demands are met," Putin said, reports Deutsche Welle, citing a German official involved in the talks.

However, Putin went on to say that either Kyiv must concede to Moscow's demands at the peace talks over the weekend or Moscow would simply impose the conditions on ***Ukraine*** "by military means," Putin told Scholz.

The call came a day after French officials said France's President Emmanuel Macron had also spoken with Putin.

During the second round of talks a day earlier the two sides agreed to set up humanitarian corridors to allow civilians from large cities to flee. However, the safe-passage corridor from the port city of Mariupol in the south of the country failed to be established as Russian forces did not cease their shelling, according to reports.

In a bizarre twist to the story, Ukrainian media reported that a member of the Ukrainian delegation at Gomel peace talks, Denys Kireyev, was killed by Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), as security agents tried to arrest him on suspicion of high treason. He is reportedly linked to elements in the ex-president Yanukovych's government and had been leaking information to the Russian delegation during the negotiations. The SBU said it has overwhelming information that Kireyev had been acting as a Russian agent.

Zelenskiy condemns Nato for not implementing no-fly zone

With a full-scale attack on Ukrainian cities looming and the strikes against residential cities increasing in both number and ferocity, Zelenskiy gave a video address where he lambasted Nato for not doing enough.

Zelenskiy made similar remarks in a televised press conference last week, but scaled up his criticism of Nato over the weekend as it becomes increasingly obvious that ***Ukraine*** will be left on its own to face the full weight of the Russian army. His remarks were provoked by a Nato members' meeting, where it was made clear the no-fly zone Kyiv has been demanding will not be forthcoming.

"Today the alliance's leadership gave a green light to the further bombardment of Ukrainian towns and villages, refusing to establish a no-fly zone (over ***Ukraine***)," Zelenskiy said during his latest address.

This weekend's peace talks could prove to be a turning point in the conflict. So far Russia's invasion force has remains concentrated in the regions just across the borders in the north, east and south of ***Ukraine***, but have not made much progress into the country.

"We are the warriors of light," Zelenskiy said of Ukrainians during the same address. He was scathing in his criticism of Nato countries, which, despite knowing Russia is only going to escalate in ***Ukraine***, were refusing to do anything about it and close the sky over ***Ukraine***.

Visibly angry with the material lack of western support in ***Ukraine***'s time of need, Zelenskiy lambasted the West for its lack of determination and unity. He said the argument reflected the "self-hypnosis of those who are weak, under-confident inside" and that Western reservations indicated that "not everyone considers the struggle for freedom to be Europe's number one goal".

"All the people who will die starting from this day will also die because of you. Because of your weakness, because of your disunity," a furious Zelenskiy added, going on to say that the only thing that Nato has sent ***Ukraine*** is 50 tonnes of diesel fuel.

Phase four of the Russian invasion imminent

As bne IntelliNews opined in a comment on Russia's "game of chicken", Putin appears to be ratcheting up the tension incrementally but is pausing at each stage to hold talks in an effort to get Kyiv to concede to his demands. In the latest military round of the game Russia has dropped an estimated 500 rockets on ***Ukraine*** at the rate of two dozen a day, but has refrained from using its heavy armour and infantry. While the destruction of residential property has increased in the last days, the death toll amongst Ukrainian civilians remains a relatively modest circa 250 and Russia's own losses are some 500 servicemen, according to official estimates.

However, that may change in the coming days. To the north of Kyiv a massive convoy stretching out over 64 km has remained stationary outside the capital for eight days. While there are reports that the convoy has run out of fuel and food, its presence threatens a full-scale attack on the city and a drastic scaling up of fighting that will result in massive destruction and death.

On March 5 Nato secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg warned that the introduction of a no-fly zone could lead to a "full-fledged war in Europe involving many more countries and causing much more human suffering".

"The only way to implement a no-fly zone is to send Nato planes, fighter planes into Ukrainian airspace, and then impose that no-fly zone by shooting down Russian planes. And our assessment is that we understand the desperation. But we also believe that if we did that, we'll end up with something that could end in a full-fledged war in Europe, involving many more countries, and causing much more human suffering. So that's the reason why we make this painful decision to impose heavy sanctions, provide significant support, stepping up support. But at the same time not involving Nato forces directly in the conflict in ***Ukraine***, neither on the ground, or in their airspace," Stoltenberg said at a press conference.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also ruled out the introduction of a no-fly zone, but told the BBC he was convinced ***Ukraine*** could win its war with Russia.

"I can't tell you how long this will go on," the US foreign minister said. "I can't tell you how long it will take. But the idea that Russia can subjugate to its will 45mn people who are ardently fighting for their future and their freedom, that does not involve Russia having its thumb on ***Ukraine***, that tells you a lot."

Separately Putin told a meeting of airline workers that any attempt by Nato or the international community to impose a no-fly zone over ***Ukraine*** would be regarded by Moscow "as participation in an armed conflict by that country", implying Russia would see a no-fly zone as an act of war against it by the West.

Analysts say that while Nato has the means and authority to impose a no-fly zone over ***Ukraine***, Moscow would see that as an act of war by Nato against Russia. The UN also has the authority to impose a no-fly zone over ***Ukraine***, but both Russia and China have vetos as members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and so can block such a resolution by the UN.

In the south-eastern port city of Mariupol, the city's mayor said that residents are under a "blockade" after days of "ruthless" attacks from Russian forces which have seen power and water shut off to the city's 450,000 strong population.

Mariupol's Mayor Vadym Boychenko pleaded for help and asked for the humanitarian corridor out of the city to be opened. He said the city is cut off from heating, water and electricity, while people are running out of food and medicine. "We are being destroyed here," he said.

A humanitarian corridor agreed with Russia at the peace talks on March 5 was not implemented, as the Russian military did not cease their shelling of the outskirts of the city.

The exodus of the besieged Ukrainians continued and gathered momentum over the weekend. As of March 3, more than 1.2mn ***refugees*** have left ***Ukraine*** since Russia's full-scale invasion began on February 24, the United Nations High Commissioner for ***Refugees*** reports, as cited by the Kyiv Independent.

Another Russian strategic goal was achieved after the North Crimean Canal was unblocked by the advancing troops and began to fill with water. The peninsula lacks its own fresh water supplies and relies on the canal for drinking water and to irrigate is extensive agricultural production. However, after Russia annexed the peninsula in 2014 Kyiv blocked the canal, cutting off its main water supply. Moscow has struggled to supply the Crimea with enough water and has talked of building extremely expensive desalination plants, but unblocking the canal has brought some immediate relief to the parched peninsula.

**Load-Date:** March 7, 2022

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**Czech developer Central Group to stop selling flats to Russian and Belarusian citizens**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 6, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 327 words

**Body**

Developer Central Group in Czechia has decided to stop offering and selling apartments in all its projects to citizens of Russian and Belarus until further notice, the company said in its press release, the Czech News Agency reported.

The only exceptions are those nationals who dissociate themselves in writing from their governments' policies towards ***Ukraine***, the company stressed, adding that the company is offering ***refugees*** an office complex in Prague.

According to Dusan Kunovsky, founder and head of Central Group, the rejection of aggression is now more important than profit. "This decision will of course have significant financial implications for us, as Russians make up a significant percentage of buyers in our projects and those of all other developers in Prague. But what is more important than profit in this time of crisis is to express a clear rejection of an aggressive war policy that threatens the very essence of our Western civilization," Kunovsky said, according to the news agency.

"We have now offered our administrative complex for immediate use by public institutions and established NGOs dealing with the current ***refugee*** wave," Kunovsky said.

More Czech companies have already stated they will no longer do business with Russia and Belarus and have decided to withdraw goods associated with Russia and of Russian and Belarusian origin from their offer. The company Bidfood Czech Republic´s brand Prima decided to rename its ice cream product from Russian Ice Cream to Ukrainian Ice Cream, in support of ***Ukraine*** and its people who are facing Russian invasion.

Online food supermarket Kosik.cz, largest online retailer Alza.cz or online pharmacy company Pilulka.cz also stopped offering food products and goods of Russian and Belarusian origin. Czech tractors producer Zetor, state-owned brewery Budejovicky Budvar or biggest brewery in the country Plzensky Prazdroj decided to withdraw their activities from the Russian market.

**Load-Date:** March 7, 2022

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**Slovenia's PM Jansa says fight for Ukraine is also fight for Europe**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 6, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 364 words

**Body**

Slovenia's Prime Minister Janez Jansa said on March 4 that the fight for ***Ukraine*** is also a fight for Europe.

Speaking in a live interview with Skynews, Jansa said that Slovenia is threatened by the events in ***Ukraine***, and added that if Russian President Vladimir Putin takes over ***Ukraine***, other countries are also threatened, "because he will continue his aggression", according to the PM's office.

"If we are defending ***Ukraine***, we are defending Europe and also Slovenia," Jansa said.

"We must do everything we can to defend ***Ukraine***," he added.

Jansa estimated that the current situation in ***Ukraine*** is similar to that in 1939, when Poland was invaded.

"If Hitler had been stopped during the attack on Poland, Europe would not have faced the six-year World War II," he said.

The prime minister added that what is happening in ***Ukraine*** is mass suffering. "In Slovenia, we know how they feel in ***Ukraine***, because we were in a similar situation 30 years ago. Slovenia was attacked by the Yugoslav People's Army, which behaved similarly to the Russian army today," Jansa said.

Jansa said that other countries should help Ukrainian ***refugees***.

"That is why we have launched an initiative to make ***Ukraine*** a member of the EU as soon as possible. This is not about procedures, but about the hope we give people," he said.

Asked what Nato's role should be regarding the Russian Federation's aggression against ***Ukraine***, Jansa said that it is appropriate that Nato is not directly involved in the conflict with ground forces, but it must do everything to strengthen ***Ukraine***'s air defense.

The prime minister emphasised that by helping the Ukrainians "we are helping to defend Europe".

"If Ukraina with a population of 40mn is occupied and we are not doing enough to help it, what will those who are against helping ***Ukraine*** say when Putin goes further to Moldova, Georgia, the Baltic states?" he said.

"The time for action is now. I am happy to see unity within the EU and Nato as we have not seen in the last three decades, and this gives hope not only to me but also to other Nato members, especially for those areas which are on the brink of war, as well as Ukrainians," Jansa concluded.

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**Russian and Belarusian VCs launch international petition "against the bloodshed in Ukraine"**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 6, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 570 words

**Body**

Even as Russian authorities are taking unprecedented measures to silence opposition or even free expression, an "international VC and startup petition against the bloodshed in ***Ukraine***" started circulating yesterday in the Russian and Belarusian tech business community, reports East-West Digital News (EWDN).

Prominent tech investors from these countries, or connected with them, signed the petition just hours after its release, alongside VCs from some western countries.

Published in four languages - Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian and English - the text "condemns the undergoing bloodshed and destructions on Ukrainian territory, and calls for immediate cease fire and a negotiated solution."

It also underlines the "devastating consequences" of the conflict in Russia and Belarus - a hint at the free fall of their economies as a result of the first sanctions, the new waves of repression and the moral shock that have hit these two countries.

The signatories of the petition call on the international VC and startup community to take an active stance - "for example, by donating funds to humanitarian organisations that provide assistance to the afflicted, in ***Ukraine*** in particular." Several programmes are cited as examples, including those of the Red Cross and the UNICEF, as well as the Airbnb initiative for hosting ***refugees***.

Finally, the petition describes technology investment as a way to "unite people everywhere around creative, productive and peaceful goals." It justly reminds that "until recently, investors from Russia, ***Ukraine*** and Belarus repeatedly demonstrated adherence to healthy international business co-operation through joint deals and co-investment."

East-West Digital News and its affiliate ***Ukraine*** Digital News have repeatedly reported on such deals, which involved Russian and Ukrainian startup investors or entrepreneurs. They continued even after Russia's first military interventions in ***Ukraine*** in 2014. Shame or repression: the Russian VC dilemma

While using strong terms to describe the consequences of the conflict ("bloodshed", "tragedy", "devastating consequences"), the petition cautiously abstains from any political assessment. The authors even describe its wording as being "compliant with current Russian legislation."

"Signatories living in Russia and Belarus obviously need to be protected from extra legal exposure," notes East-West Digital News co-founder Adrien Henni, who also signed the petition. "But even with the most careful wording, they're taking personal risks in the current context."

On the other hand, Henni explains, "the petition offers Russian and Belarusian VCs a space of expression to avoid having their name associated with Putin's war, as anti-Russian feelings are mounting across the world."

A "name-and-shame" web page is now circulating to denounce Russian VCs who support the war "either openly or by silence." Only five explicit supporters of the war were identified as of March 6, while 62 tech investors made no comments or took an ambiguous position on the conflict. On the other side, 43 Russian or Russia-connected VCs expressed their opposition to the war.

A previous petition from the Russian IT community was launched in the first days of the war. It gathered no less than 33,494 signatures from IT workers.

The initiative was suspended on March 4, however, following the adoption of a new law tightening censorship in Russia.

**Load-Date:** March 7, 2022

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**Collapse of Orban's Kremlin policy leaves him precariously balanced between East and West**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 6, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 1315 words

**Body**

Hungary's general election campaign has so far been completely overshadowed by the war in ***Ukraine***: Public discourse has not been about Prime Minister Viktor Orban's massive handouts or his government's massive corruption, but about Russia's unprovoked attack on Hungary's eastern neighbour.

So far this seems to be benefiting the government, which already has a head start over the opposition, but the final outcome will only be known after April 3.

The government, which has forged strong ties with Russia over the last 12 years, was unprepared for the "worst-case scenario" of war and has had to conduct a precarious balancing act of meeting its obligation to its Nato and EU allies while trying at the same time to appease its pro-Putin base.

"For the first time in the past 12 years, Fidesz' voter base is split on a major political issue," commented political analyst Gabor Torok.

This division within the ruling camp stems from the way Fidesz has "raised a monster" - its propaganda bred a way of thinking that threatens and limits its course of action, Torok said, referring to its anti-EU and pro-Russian stance, as Orban built up an illiberal regime over the years that in many ways resembles Putin's Russia.

While Hungarians are overwhelmingly in favour of EU membership, the support for EU institutions is lower among Fidesz voters, according to previous polls. A GlobSec survey from 2018 found that Vladimir Putin was the most popular foreign leader among Hungarians, with a 33% rating compared to then German Chancellor Angela Merkel's 27%.

The low approval rating of EU leaders is clearly linked to Orban's constant battle with the EU. Brussels has taken long-overdue measures to punish Hungary's illiberal leader for dismantling democratic checks and balances and silencing independent media, as well as rampant corruption. The conflict escalated last year over the bloc's new rule-of-law mechanism, which risks cutting off EU funds vital for the economy.

All stations East

As he has become increasingly isolated in the EU, Orban has sought new allies in the East, forging strong political ties with Russia and China. Economically, the Opening to the East strategy has failed, as 80% of Hungary's trade is still with its EU neighbours. But the strategy is important in propaganda terms because it can persuade voters that Hungary is playing a major global role, and that it has other options apart from the EU.

This shift towards the east is typical of the way Orban has changed course throughout his political career. He was a liberal, anti-Communist leader in 1988, later he moved to the centre-right, but after a sweeping victory in 2010 he shifted to the radical right and began to build up an illiberal regime.

As an opposition leader, he lashed out at Russian aggression during the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. He warned of the risks of over-dependence on Russian energy and the building up of ties with Russian state energy companies such as Gazprom.

But he then began a U-turn after his first visit to the Kremlin even while an opposition leader in 2009. Hungary now makes a virtue of having ditched a value-based foreign policy in favour of striking pragmatic deals with autocratic regimes such as Russia and China.

After returning from his 13th meeting with Vladimir Putin since 2010 on February 1, the Hungarian premier boasted of the "success" of the Hungarian model during his leadership. The cooperation between Russia and Hungary as an EU and Nato member was an example that could be followed by others, he said. Orban also claimed that his February "peace mission" was a success, a claim that was quickly contradicted by the events that followed.

In the current conflict Orban has found himself in a very uncomfortable position, with calls for him to end the double game of looking east and west. The government has come under criticism by the opposition for its neutral stance and for not fully backing allies.

Western diplomats and sources close to the government interviewed by liberal news website hvg.hu agree that this Opening to the East policy led by Minister Peter Szijjarto will be untenable in the future.

Yet he cannot admit any new shift without losing face, analysts said, and that is why he will continue the "peacock dance", an approach designed to appease critics with only cosmetic policy changes.

So far Orban has condemned Russia's military intervention and stood by ***Ukraine***'s territorial integrity, and has belatedly offered Ukrainian ***refugees*** help. But unlike his EU or V4 peers, he has not come down hard on the Kremlin. While Hungary's V4 partners were calling for more and tougher sanctions, he has only grudgingly accepted the EU's list of sanctions, including cutting off Russia from SWIFT, and only because he feared the backlash if he broke the bloc's unity.

But he has made it clear that energy issues, including Rosatom's expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant (Paks II), must be left out of the sanctions list. Maintaining ties with Russia on the energy front is vital for Orban as Hungary relies on cheap Russian gas to keep household prices low, and is dependent on Russian technology to expand Paks. The government froze retail electricity prices in 2013 and keeping the bills low are key parts of Orban's re-election campaign.

Man of peace

Fidesz's spin doctors have now come up with a new communication strategy to make the best of Orban's uncomfortable position, by portraying him as the leader who wants to keep Hungary out of the military conflict. According to sources close to Fidesz, the party is trying to bridge the division within its voter base by emphasising "neutrality" and the desire for "peace".

Orban is depicted as a leader who provides security, in contrast with the opposition, which wants to drag the country into war by sending weapons and soldiers to ***Ukraine***.

Orban has imposed a ban on the transit of arms to ***Ukraine*** through Hungary after reports that a Hungarian-flag carrier took part in an operation delivering arms from the Netherlands to Poland. This stance angered Nato and EU allies, but is backed by a two-thirds majority of voters.

The government has also ruled out accepting the stationing of Nato troops on its territory, unlike ruling Slovakia, where accepting foreign troops is also unpopular, given both countries' experience of Russian military invasion and occupation when they were members of the Warsaw Pact.

The government's propaganda machine has unleashed an attack on Peter Marki-Zay, taking comments by the opposition's alliance joint prime ministerial candidate out of context. Marki-Zay has not ruled out sending Hungarian soldiers and weapons to help ***Ukraine***, but only if requested by Nato.

It remains to be seen how this game will play out among the undecided, analysts said. A recent Median opinion poll indicates that the ruling Fidesz party widened its lead at the end of February, but that is was still within the 4pp margin of error. A Republikon poll showed that 48% of decided voters would vote for Fidesz and 46% for the six-party alliance

Polls also show that many disenchanted pro-Russian Fidesz voters could now pick pro-Kremlin radical rightwing Our Homeland party, with has 3-4% support, close to the 5% threshold to enter parliament.

A recent poll by Opinion showed that 60% of people thought the prime minister's close relations with Putin impeded him from taking a tougher stance against Russia. But the same poll showed that some 72% think Hungary should keep an equal distance from ***Ukraine*** and Russia, and 69% agree with the ban on the transfer of arms.

The opposition should take into account voters' desire for peace and stability, Torok noted, saying comments by Marki-Zay that Orban is responsible for the war could be counter-productive. The quest for stability amid turbulent times generally helps the incumbent, he added.

**Load-Date:** March 7, 2022

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**Poland struggles to cope with biggest refugee wave since WWII**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 7, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 988 words

**Body**

Poland, which had said a few weeks before the Russian attack on ***Ukraine*** that it could welcome "even up to one million ***refugees***", has gone on to face that very situation by just the 12th day of the war.

Since the first Russian battalions entered ***Ukraine*** on February 24, nearly 1.07mn ***refugees*** have crossed into Poland, the Border Guard said in its latest update on March 6. "The traffic on the border is growing with 42,000 people arriving only [on March 7] by 7am," the Border Guard said.

As the fighting continues, there is every chance that there will be many more ***refugees***. That is unprecedented for Poland, which has not seen a similar migration since World War 2, when two million Poles resettled from the then Soviet Union - but over two years.

It is shortly past noon at the train station in Przemysl, a town of 60,000 at the foot of the Carpathian mountain range. The station's main hall is brimming with people. Another train has arrived from Lviv, ***Ukraine***'s seventh largest city, a place of refuge that has yet to see what residents of Kyiv, Kharkiv and other Ukrainian cities further east have endured for nearly two weeks now.

Roman Ishchuk, 36, is a restaurant worker from Kyiv, who has just arrived in Przemysl after a four-day ordeal that involved leaving the capital on an evacuation train.

"When I got to the [Kyiv] train station, it was full of panicking people. I've never seen anything like this. It was terrifying," Ishchuk says, while he takes a cigarette break outside the station with a friend, Irina Lisginskaya, 19, a Kyiv student. "We only got on the train after they added extra cars to it," he says.

Ishchuk hopes to return to Kyiv to fight but hundreds of thousands of ***refugees*** - mostly children, women, and the elderly - will be staying in Poland, probably for many months, if not years.

There were already at least one million Ukrainians in Poland before the war, economic ***migrants*** who had come over the past few years to find better jobs. The informal compatriot network of the Ukrainians, together with the mobilisation of Polish society and the NGOs, has helped Poland just about cope with the fast-rising wave.

Daria Dehtierova, 30, has only recently returned to Poland - where she has lived since 2020 - from Kharkiv. She is lucky. By the time she arrived in Poland, Kharkiv, ***Ukraine***'s second biggest city with more than 1.4mn people, is being shelled daily, with no humanitarian corridor in sight - despite Russia's assurances. ***Ukraine***'s "capital of students" has seen thousands flee, not just Ukrainians but also people from Africa and the Middle East who had come there to study.

"I heard something outside and realised they had started shelling us. My brother told me I should leave immediately," Dehtierova says. She has arrived from Poznan, western Poland, where she lives, to help as a volunteer in Przemysl.

Maintaining solidarity

Since the war began, the ***refugees*** have relied on people like her. Grassroots initiatives are in the thousands, raising money, collecting clothing, hygienic items and food, and finding shelter for the ***refugees***, often in ordinary Polish homes.

Social media are filled with cross-messaging about who is doing what and where to help.

"I am on the lookout for an inexpensive apartment with 2-3 rooms for a Ukrainian family to rent. A total of six people including two children. Proximity to school and kindergarten important, as well as good access to the internet. Maybe someone has a free apartment in a city or small town? Warsaw has overwhelmed them in terms of price," is a common type of social media post.

This grassroots effort has won Poland some much needed good publicity, even if there have also been reports of discrimination against dark skinned ***refugees***, something also visible in the country's ongoing pushback policy against Middle Eastern ***refugees*** entering the country via Belarus.

As the number of ***refugees*** grows, however, there is more and more questioning of the government's strategy to cope with the mass movement of people. Sooner or later, NGOs warn, the early solidarity could wane and there will come a time for a top-down effort to integrate ***refugees*** - to help them find jobs, put their kids in kindergartens and schools, and ensure they have access to healthcare.

The Polish government said on March 7 that it would adopt a special law to help ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** that could cost some PLN1.8bn to PLN3.5bn (€700mn) a year.

The basic premise of the law - which will be fast-tracked through the parliament, with the opposition likely to give it overwhelming support - is that ***refugees*** will be given the right to stay in Poland for 18 months with minimal formalities. They will also have an option to stay for another 18 months - so three years in total.

The government also plans to pay Poles who will host ***refugees*** in their homes PLN1,200 (€242) a month for two months per person to help meet the financial cost of help. Local authorities will receive money from the central budget to finance public education for ***refugee*** children or to ensure ***refugees*** are covered by the public healthcare system.

"***Refugees*** from ***Ukraine*** must know that they can live their lives as close to normal as possible in Poland," Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told a press conference on March 7.

But Polish NGOs have criticised the government's approach - the idea to pay people for housing ***refugees*** in particular. That smacks of privatising humanitarian aid, says Weronika Samolinska, who has been working with Ukrainian ***refugees*** since the war began.

"It's going to be impossible to control the living conditions of almost a million people. Volunteers at train stations are not going to be able to check who they send families with children to. Will ***refugees*** end up with someone truly willing to help or with someone in it for the money only?" Samolinska warns.

**Load-Date:** March 8, 2022

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**A third round of Russia, Ukraine peace talks due to start, as thousands of Russian anti-war protesters arrested**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 7, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 859 words

**Body**

A third round of peace talks between Russia and ***Ukraine*** are due to begin on March 7 a day after over 4,300 Russians were arrested for attending anti-war protests across the country.

Prospects for the three round of peace talks between the Russian and Ukrainian delegation have improved with both sides indicating their positions have moved somewhat closer together, but several sticking points remain.

The Ukrainian delegation said that they can agree on "almost everything" amongst the demands, except the recognition of Crimea as Russia and the autonomy from ***Ukraine*** of Donetsk and Luhansk regions that Russia has already recognised as independent states.

Both sides also agreed to set up humanitarian corridors that were already agreed at the second meeting a week earlier.

And real progress was made on the issue of ***Ukraine***'s membership of Nato. Kyiv has conceded that with no prospect of being offered Nato membership anytime soon that it remains open to finding a compromise on these issues.

***Ukraine*** delegation negotiator David Arahamia said: "We are ready to discuss some non-Nato models. There would be security agreements with countries like Russia, UK, France. We are ready to talk about that."

Giving up aspirations to join Nato is the crucial point for the Russian delegation.

Russian protests

Hundreds of thousands of Russians took to the streets to answer a call for protests against the war with ***Ukraine*** that have been made illegal with new oppressive laws in recent days. The laws make it a crime to call the fighting in ***Ukraine*** a "war" or an "invasion."

Thousands of protesters chanted "No to war!" and "Shame on you!", according to videos posted on social media from many cities across Russia.

More than 4,300 people were detained at anti-war protests in 56 cities across Russia on Sunday, the OVD-Info rights group reports that tracks political arrests. Some 1,700 people were detained in Moscow alone and another 750 in St Petersburg, according to the interior ministry. More than 10,000 people have been arrested for protesting against the war since it began on February 24, according to OVD-Info.

Dozens of protesters in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg were shown being detained. One protester there was shown being beaten on the ground by police in riot gear. A mural in the city showing President Vladimir Putin was defaced.

"The screws are being fully tightened - essentially we are witnessing military censorship," Maria Kuznetsova, OVD-Info's spokeswoman, told Reuters news agency from Tbilisi in Georgia. "We are seeing rather big protests today - even in Siberian cities, where we only rarely saw such numbers of arrests."

The Russian interior ministry said only 5,200 people had taken part in the country-wide protests. OVD-Info didn't give an estimate for the total number of participants but pointed out that the number of confirmed arrests were only slightly less than the official estimate for the total size of the protest. Verifying information has become much harder in recent days as most of Russia's liberal media has been shut down and international news organisations including Bloomberg and the BBC have shut down their in-country operations because of the new laws making it illegal to report on topics related to the war in ***Ukraine***.

International diplomacy continues

Zelenskiy says he has survived three assignation attempts in the last few days since the Russian invasion began.

Two different hit teams have been sent to kill the Ukrainian president: mercenaries of the Kremlin-backed military mercenaries the Wagner group and Chechen special forces sent by Chechen president Ramzon Kadyrov. Both have been thwarted by anti-war elements within Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) that tipped the Ukrainians off, according to various reports.

Zelenskiy and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken commenting on the assignation attempts say they have made contingency plans in case the president were killed.

In the meantime the humanitarian crisis continues as more than 1.5mn Ukrainian ***refugees*** flee the country and have left ***Ukraine*** according to the UN of which more than 1mn have crossed into Poland alone.

Diplomatic efforts also continued over the weekend. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Putin over the weekend and called for a ceasefire.

Also stressed the need for "constructive talks between the two parties so that they can find a diplomatic solution." Erdogan offered to mediate between the two sides.

Also over the weekend European Union's top diplomat Josep Borrell called on China to become a media.

"This is not going to be solved by European players. I'm afraid it has to be China," said Borrell.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of Israel secretly travelled to Moscow to meet with Putin, according to Israeli and Russian officials.

"The situation around ***Ukraine*** is being discussed," a Kremlin spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told reporters.

MasterCard and Visa joined the growing rank of companies pulling out of Russia. Cards of Russian banks will no longer work outside of the country, however, those cards will work inside Russia on the domestic payment system.

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**The third round of Russo-Ukraine peace talks break up with no agreement, but some progress**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 7, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 876 words

**Body**

The third round of Russo-Ukrainian peace talks held on the border with Belarus broke up after three hours with no breakthrough but made some progress.

"This is really hard work," one of the Russian delegates told the local press after the meeting ended, adding that the Russian expectations had not been met. "We hoped they would sign some the documents but they have just taken them back to Kyiv for consultations."

One of the positive steps forward made by the delegations was they worked out the logistical issues with mooted humanitarian corridors out of the conflict zones, which they hoped would come into operation on March 8, International Women's Day.

Previous agreements to set up humanitarian corridors at the second meeting in the Belarusian border town of Gomel on February 27 had also tried to establish safety routes for civilians out of cities but were unable to be implemented as Russian troops failed to pause shelling.

Disagreements remained over the routes the corridors will offer. The Russian side proposed corridors that exited cities such as Kyiv and Kharkiv, but crossed the borders into Belarus and Russia, whereas the Ukrainian side wanted routes that lead to peaceful parts of ***Ukraine*** in the centre so ***refugees*** can travel on to exit the country over the western borders into the EU.

Less progress was made on the main substance of the talks. The Russian delegation arrived with four points that they are demanding the ***Ukraine*** delegation concede: Appoint the head of the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc Yuriy Boyko (aka Boiko) as Prime Minister; Recognise the Crimea peninsula as Russian territory; Recognise that the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are independent; and Give up ***Ukraine***'s Nato aspirations and adopt neutrality.

Notably the Russian delegation seems to have dropped the demands that ***Ukraine*** "denazify" the country and "demilitarise" ***Ukraine***. The Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement on March 7 that demilitarisation has already been achieved.

The Ukrainian delegation has suggested since the second meeting that Bankova is "open to the idea" of returning to neutrality, which was enshrined in the constitution until 2014, until the post-Euromaidan revolution government changed the constitution to make Nato membership a national aspiration.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has become visibly angry and disillusioned with the lack of support that ***Ukraine*** has received from Nato. In a video address on March 5 he lambasted Nato for not sticking to its own principles and for failing to come to ***Ukraine***'s aid by closing the skies to Russian aviation.

"All the people who will die starting from this day will also die because of you. Because of your weakness, because of your disunity," a furious Zelenskiy added, going on to say that the only thing that Nato has sent ***Ukraine*** is 50 tonnes of diesel fuel.

As Nato has not offered ***Ukraine*** a roadmap to Nato membership, despite Zelenskiy's passionate appeals, and clearly has no intention of doing so, neutrality is the next best option. A member of the Ukrainian delegation suggested that ***Ukraine*** could become neutral again and then sign bilateral security deals with other Nato members like the US and the UK.

The Russian delegation said they were pleased and encouraged by Kyiv's willingness to adopt neutrality.

More difficult are the demands that Kyiv recognise the Crimea as Russian sovereign territory and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as independent. Bankova is highly unlike to concede either of those two points, as both require a government to give away territory, something no government is ever willing to do.

However, the Ukrainian delegation did not give a flat no and instead took the Russian documents back to Kyiv for consultations. Both sides agreed to meet again for a fourth round of talks in the near future.

Zelenskiy now finds himself in a very difficult position. Russian President Vladimir Putin's rapid escalation to a full invasion of ***Ukraine*** after the two rounds of diplomacy failed in January and February, bypassing any intermediary escalation steps, makes it clear that he will carry out the implicit threat of launching a full-scale assault on Kyiv, or an equivalent extreme measure, should these talks also fail.

In this sense the current talks in Gomel on the Belarusian border are not negotiations at all but simply the delivery of Russian demands that the Ukrainian side can either accept or reject.

In a phone conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron last week Putin said that the Ukrainian side can either accept Russia's demands, "or we will take them militarily."

If Bankova accepts Putin's demands then the Russians have promised to stop the military campaign and withdraw. If Bankova refuses then Putin is threatening a full-scale and bloody escalation until ***Ukraine***'s military is defeated and the same demands are presented again unchanged.

The two sides are expected to meet again in the coming days and the Ukrainian delegation said it hopes more progress will be made at the next meeting. In the meantime, the number of rocket attacks has slowed although residential centres are still being targeted and casualties are being incurred by both sides.

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**MOSCOW BLOG: Rescuing family as Ukraine implodes**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 7, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 656 words

**Body**

The war in ***Ukraine*** is starting to creep into everyone's households and that will only continue. It has walked into mine already. Elina Ribakova, deputy chief economist with the Institute of International Finance (IIF), a frequent guest on bne IntelliNews podcasts and highly respected Russian expert, turned up here in Berlin over the weekend from Washington DC.

She has been on the phone for the last week trying to persuade her grandmother to leave her town in eastern ***Ukraine***, just south of Kharkiv near the Russian border, and finally succeed in persuading her to get into a car and go.

Stories of civilians fleeing the fighting are now pouring out of ***Ukraine*** as 1.5mn have already left, but this time I got to help a little. There were six people in the Elina's party in the end, three adults including her cousin and their children aged six, 12 and 16. The 12-year old is special needs and in a wheelchair.

Elina's story is typical of Eastern Europe and why this war is so senseless. Her mother was Ukrainian but the family worked and lived in Moscow, but Elina herself was born and raised in Latvia and holds a Latvian passport (and now a US one). However, she still has a granny, cousins and an uncle in ***Ukraine***.

From Berlin she has been trying to organise the rescue of her family. They drove to the Romanian border and crossed it yesterday where a family friend in Romania picked them up and put them up for a day. From there they will fly to Vienna where they have to overnight before flying on to Riga where Elina has an empty apartment; her father was living there but died earlier this year and she has not done anything with the flat yet.

I got roped in as Elina had no friends in Vienna and was trying to find the family a place to stay. As it happens I have a good friend there married to a Russian and put in a call. The reaction was heartwarming as my friend's wife called around the Russian community in Vienna. The reaction to the plea for help was almost immediate and unrestrained. In less than hour an apartment was found and a mini-van that could cope with the wheelchair for the 12-year booked to meet them at the airport.

The Russian community in Vienna is as appalled by what Russian President Vladimir Putin is doing to ***Ukraine*** as any westerners - more so - and more than happy to do anything they can to help the victims of this unprovoked war get out and to safety.

It is one of the less known qualities of the Russian people: their overwhelming sense of hospitality. I have been on the receiving end of this many times during my extensive travels around Russia and it is one of their most endearing and admirable qualities, the warmth of the reception you get if you are a guest. Russians can come across as cold and rude if you are not a guest, but that changes immediately and drastically if you are (and usually descends into a big drinking session and a huge meal, ending with you getting wasted on several bottles of vodka).

Elina's family will arrive in Riga on Friday to an apartment and more help as she has many friends there to care for her relatives. There are many Belarusian ***refugees*** in Riga too, including Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who lives there permanently.

Then what? No one knows. The first plan is to sit out the fighting and hope the war ends quickly with minimum damage. However, it could easily drag on for months and if the destruction is massive, which is likely in that case, even if their houses are not destroyed the economy will be. A quarter of ***Ukraine***'s population has already left the country to look for work in places like Poland, but these ***refugees*** may not have the option of going back even if the fighting is over as there will be no way to make a living for the foreseeable future.

Everyone's lives have been thrown into turmoil and even if this ends quickly the aftershocks are going to persist for much longer.

**Load-Date:** March 8, 2022

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**Central Asia `pushed into corner not of its choosing faces considerable collateral damage from Ukraine invasion'**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 8, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 416 words

**Body**

The collateral damage to Central Asia from Vladimir Putin's Ukrainian invasion is likely to be considerable, according to Raffaello Pantucci, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

The region, he said, has been "pushed into a corner not of its choosing".

"Millions of Central Asian citizens work in Russia, and their remittances to their families back home are a crucial source of income, something that will be hit by the abrupt drop in the value of the ruble," wrote Pantucci, author of the forthcoming Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire (Oxford University Press, April 2022), in an essay for Nikkei Asia.

He added: "The collapse in the value of the Russian currency has also led to massive knock-on devaluations across Central Asia as markets reflect on the consequences of Russia's exclusion from the international economy.

Russia is a major investor and partner to all five countries. Russia has reportedly invested around $40 billion in Kazakhstan alone since the fall of the Soviet Union, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are bound intimately to the Russian economy as members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

"All of this means that when Russia suffers economically, Central Asia feels it. Now, the region is bracing for the worst. Central Asia may have experienced something similar following the 2014 sanctions leveled against Russia [after the annexation of Crimea], but this time the hit is likely to be exponentially harder."

This dismal prospect "comes at a moment of great flux in a region still suffering from the fallout from COVID", noted Pantucci, also pointing out that Kazakhstan is still recovering from the national unrest that rocked it in January, Turkmenistan is in the midst of a leadership transition and Tajikistan appears to be on the cusp of something similar.

"Many geostrategists may be tempted to conclude that Beijing is likely to benefit. And there is no doubt that this will strengthen Chinese options in the region. But the reality is that Central Asia will still be very much tied to Russia, with all the consequent loss of income that will entail. Central Asian ***migrant*** labor will struggle to find the same opportunities in other countries," concluded the academic. "Now entirely encircled by countries that are being targeted by escalating Western sanctions-Afghanistan, Iran, China and Russia--Central Asia is increasingly finding itself between an economic hard place and a politically precarious one."

**Load-Date:** March 9, 2022

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**Hungary backtracks from ban on Nato troop deployment and transit of weapons**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 8, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 597 words

**Body**

Hungary will allow Nato troops to deploy in western Hungary and weapons shipments to cross its territory to other Nato member states, according to a government decree published on March 7.

Hungary rejected the deployment of Nato troops earlier last month. The Hungarian army is in the proper shape to guarantee the security of the country, Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told Euronews on February 10.

After a meeting of the national security operative board on Monday, Prime Minister Viktor Orban posted a short message on Facebook, but did not tell his supporters every aspect of the government decree. He only confirmed that weapons will not be transported to ***Ukraine*** from the territory of Hungary. "A decree has been published that makes it clear that no weapons shipments can be transported from the territory of Hungary to the territory of ***Ukraine***", Orban said.

He did not speak of the deployment of Nato troops either.

Opposition parties say Orban is continuing his double game in the conflict.

Feeling the pressure from his allies, he has condemned Russia's military intervention and stood by ***Ukraine***'s territorial integrity, but unlike his EU or V4 peers, he has not come down hard on the Kremlin. While its V4 partners were calling for more and tougher sanctions, Orban has only grudgingly accepted the EU's list of sanctions, including cutting off Russia from the SWIFT bank messaging system.

The radical rightwing Our Homeland movement lashed out at the government for backtracking from the ban imposed on lethal weapons to pass through the country after the defence ministry released a photo of Hungarian-flagged cargo being loaded with weapons shipped from the Netherlands to Poland.

Orbán called it worrisome that military action in ***Ukraine*** was shifting nearer to Hungary. As a result, the number of ***refugees*** is expected to grow, he said. "We must be prepared for having to look after an increasing number of people," he said, and added that decisions had been made to guarantee smooth cooperation between authorities and civil organisations. Diplomatic measures have been planned for this week because further efforts will be made in the interest of restoring peace.

Visegrad Group prime ministers will meet in London on Tuesday, ahead of a meeting of European Union prime ministers meeting on Thursday and Friday in Paris, Orban said. "We will try to stop the war and open talks that could lead to peace," Orban told local media.

With less than four weeks to go until the elections, Orban is trying to maintain a delicate balancing act so as not be seen as a close ally of Vladimir Putin, but at the same time also not angering his core supporters,  many of whom are critical of Hungary's transatlantic ties with Nato and the EU and are more pro-Russian.

Hungary's strongman has boasted of the success of the Hungarian model, referring to its strong ties with Russia while also being a Nato and EU member, during his visit to Moscow on February 1.

The government's communication narrative has shifted since, and the line is that Hungary needs to remain neutral in the conflict. Orban is portraying himself as the leader who wants Hungary out of the military conflict and provides security, in contrast with the opposition, which according to the pro-government narrative wants to drag the country into war by sending weapons and soldiers to the military zone.

The opposition has denied these claims as lies. Prime ministerial candidate Peter Marki-Zay said that a move to send troops or materiel would only happen if there were a direct request from Nato.

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**Rising Georgian backlash to Russian influx**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 8, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 1033 words

**Body**

As many Russians flee tightening repression and economic ruin at home, many of them are heading to Georgia. And they are finding an increasingly hostile reception.

"Dear Citizens/Natives of Russian Federation! You are not welcome to Georgia," goes one meme that has been widely shared in recent days.

Another viral Facebook campaign, launched by the head of the country's most famous traditional dance troupe, has many Georgians issuing the pledge: "I am Georgian by nationality and I am strongly against accepting Russians as ***refugees*** in Georgia and them crossing the border into my country, even as a tourist. I am not a Russophobe and not hateful. I understand that not all Russians are like Putin, but I do not trust them and this is my right and my freedom, because I love my Georgian homeland!"

In a softer form of the same sentiment, many Georgians are calling for Russians to be forced to get visas to enter the country. (Georgia currently allows citizens from 95 countries, including Russia, to enter the country visa-free.)

"In just one week, thousands of Russian citizens entered Georgia, endangering the country's national security," went one widely-shared petition calling for a visa regime to be instituted. "They may include representatives of the Russian special services."

This anti-Russian sentiment has exploded in recent days, including among many ostensible Georgian liberals. It is thus far, however, mostly confined to social media. There are reports of Georgian landlords and Airbnb hosts denying would-be Russian tenants, and Russian expat social media and Telegram groups have reports of sporadic interpersonal conflicts.

But as more Russians flood into Georgia - more than 20,000 in recent days alone, the government has said - the prospect for more social tension appears strong.

Georgians have ample reason to mistrust the Russian government, which militarily and financially backs the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and which fought a war with Georgia in 2008 as Tbilisi was trying to execute a geopolitical pivot toward the West.

Traditionally, though, most Georgians have drawn a distinction between Russia's government and Russian people and culture. This new outburst of anti-Russian sentiment is threatening to rend that distinction.

"What kind of idiotic text is this spreading so much?" prominent writer Lasha Bugadze wrote on Facebook, referring to the viral "I am Georgian by nationality" posts. "This is xenophobia, it's a disaster."

Belgium-based Georgian artist Shalva Nikvashvili posted on Instagram that the campaign was "extremely racist" but the negative response to his post was so extensive that he turned off comments.

Businesses are fanning the flames, as well. One of the country's largest banks, Bank of Georgia, has begun requiring new Russian customers to sign a loyalty pledge in which they agree to "condemn Russia's invasion of Georgia and ***Ukraine***," to "help fight against Russian propaganda." A bank representative, via Facebook message, confirmed that the measure was in place and explained that Russian citizens were "subject to stricter procedures as the country is subject to a high risk assessment."

The backlash has emerged even though, by all accounts, Tbilisi's existing Russian community is overwhelmingly against the war and opposes the government of President Vladimir Putin.

"I understand how everyone is feeling, but please hear me - The absolute majority of Russian-speaking expats here in Georgia DO NOT support the Russian government, and they are trying to do their best to help ***Ukraine***," wrote one longtime Russian resident in Tbilisi in an expat Facebook group. "Please, let us unite (and not divide) in the face of terror. Let us show unity in Georgia like the whole world shows unity in the face of the aggressor."

While it is impossible to know conclusively, it appears that the new exodus out of Russia - which one observer called "the largest brain drain of Putin's era" - is also nearly entirely anti-Putin and anti-war.

Still, many Georgians say those Russians should be doing more inside Russia to help stop Putin and the war. And they accuse the exiles of "running away" merely to avoid the "discomfort" - in the words of former defence minister Tinatin Khidasheli - occasioned by the heavy economic sanctions that many countries have imposed on Russia in response to its invasion of ***Ukraine***.

"It is important that Russian citizens stay in Russia and protest the actions of their aggressor government," the writers of the visa petition argued.

Russians in Georgia say those arguments minimize the threat that Russians are now facing, where thousands are being arrested at anti-protests and a new law threatens 15 years in prison for spreading what the government deems to be "misinformation" about the war.

"I know the bravery and determination of Georgians and of course everyone remembers the `Rose Revolution' and the rest of their protests: the bravery of young people deserves praise!" another Russian expat wrote in a Facebook group for Russian-speaking residents of Tbilisi. "But Georgians don't entirely understand the rottenness and cruelty of the Putin regime ... guys, please don't judge people who are fleeing to your always-hospitable country from this insane tyranny!"

The head of the ruling Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze, blamed the anti-Russian agitation on the political opposition, and said that instituting restrictions against Russian citizens because of the actions of their government would be an "unheard-of phenomenon in the civilised world."

The party has long been accused of indifference to discrimination against other minority groups. But the government has been trying to ride out the current crisis by minimising its open criticism of the Kremlin, which often sees manifestations of Russophobia in Georgia even when they don't exist.

Georgian Dream was working on legislation banning "discrimination on ethnic grounds and incitement of ethnic hatred," Kobakhidze told reporters on March 4.

Joshua Kucera is the Turkey/Caucasus editor at Eurasianet, and author of The Bug Pit.

This article originally appeared on Eurasianet here.

**Load-Date:** March 9, 2022

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**Tajik economist predicts sharp boost in unemployment and poverty in Tajikistan amid Russia sanctions**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 9, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 276 words

**Body**

Foziljon Fatulloev, a Tajik economist, has told Al Jazeera that Tajikistan "will suffer from poverty and a sharp increase in unemployment" due to the sanctions imposed on Russia in response to the ***Ukraine*** invasion.

Fatulloev expected Tajikistan to see major business closures in sectors such as retail and light industry, leading to a shortfall in tax revenues and cuts to the state budget. Around 70% of Tajik families depend on remittances from Russia, with the remaining 30% relying on the support networks of relatives and their own earnings, according to a 2019 survey conducted by the Research Institute under the Tajik National Bank. ***Migrant*** workers sent more than $2.5bn to Tajikistan in 2019 alone, according to data released by the Central Bank of Russia.

"The total amount of Tajikistan's external debt exceeds $3bn," Fatulloev said. "If the Russian economy drops, the crisis will break out in our country as well. We will not be able to pay off these debts. The only way that we can minimise the consequences of the crisis in Tajikistan is the adoption of the ruble system in Tajikistan by joining the Eurasian Customs Union and trading in rubles."

Remittances from Russia to Tajikistan fell during the first nine months of 2021 to $1.3bn, marking a nearly 50% decline compared to 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Russia's Central Bank.  Despite the decline, remittances were estimated to account for 28% of Tajikistan's GDP in 2021, according to World Bank figures.

A weaker ruble in Russia, affecting the value of Tajikistan's remittances, would mean less money for food and other basic necessities for Tajik households.

**Load-Date:** March 9, 2022

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**US Vice President Kamala Harris to discuss further action on Russia in Poland and Romania**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 10, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 332 words

**Body**

US Vice President Kamala Harris is in Poland and Romania on March 10-11 to discuss with the Eastern European allies the next steps to punish Russia for its aggression against ***Ukraine*** and show unity within Nato as it tries to support Ukrainians without engaging in open war with Moscow.

***Ukraine***'s neighbours Poland and Romania have become frontline countries after the outbreak of the war on February 24. Poland has also taken in most of more than 2mn ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine***.

"This trip comes at an important moment as the United States continues to demonstrate unity with our Nato allies and provide support to the people of ***Ukraine*** in response to Putin's invasion of ***Ukraine***," Harris said on her official Twitter account.

"They will discuss our continuing support for the people of ***Ukraine*** through security, economic, and humanitarian assistance and our determination to impose severe economic consequences on Russia and those complicit in Russia's invasion," it added.

Harris will meet Polish President Andrzej Duda, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, as well as Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who is also in Warsaw. She will also meet ***refugees*** and US diplomats who left ***Ukraine*** in the wake of the war.

The meeting will also focus on supporting Poland and Romania in taking care of Ukrainian ***refugees***.

Harris is also coming to Warsaw following confusion over the handling of the issue of supplying fighter jets to ***Ukraine***, a delicate matter due to its potential consequence of drawing Nato into the war directly.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said ahead of Harris' visit that the vice president would rather not discuss the issue of Poland providing ***Ukraine*** with MIG-29 fighter jets, which Poland - apparently to the surprise of the US - said earlier this week could be moved to the US military base in Ramstein, Germany, and be stationed there "at the disposal of the US government".

"This particular issue will be worked through military channels," Psaki said.

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**Russia-Ukraine conflict triggers a change in US-Venezuela relations**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 11, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 1202 words

**Body**

Sanctions may be on the chopping block as Washington looks for ways to make more oil available

WHAT: A delegation of US officials has reportedly visited Venezuela to discuss renewal of access to world oil markets.

WHY: Washington may be willing to sacrifice its sanctions policy for the sake of increasing crude supplies.

WHAT NEXT: Although political opposition to co-operation with Venezuela will persist, the tone of the conversation between the US and Venezuela has changed significantly.

Objectively speaking, not much time has passed since Russia began its invasion of ***Ukraine***. Nevertheless, the invasion has already triggered major shifts on the geopolitical scene.

One such shift may be playing out right now between the US and Venezuela.

Background

Washington and Caracas have been at odds for some time.

Economic relations between the two sides have become steadily more strained since 1999, when Hugo Chávez, an outspoken critic of capitalism and free markets, became president of Venezuela. These pressures intensified after Caracas re-nationalised the oil industry in 2007, in a move that directly affected ExxonMobil and other US-based companies. However, Chevron and other US firms maintained a presence there and continued to co-operate with the national oil company (NOC) PdVSA, even as concerns mounted in Washington and elsewhere about political repression, first under Chávez and then under his successor Nicolas Maduro, who became president in 2013.

The US government began imposing economic sanctions on Venezuela more than 15 years ago. Initially, it did so because of concerns about the country's involvement in drug trafficking and about certain government officials' ties to leaders of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah. But in 2015, President Barack Obama expanded the scope of the sanctions regime, citing concerns about the Maduro administration's human rights violations and acts of political repression.

These concerns intensified after Venezuela's presidential elections in December 2018. In response to reports that Maduro had used fraudulent means to ensure that he remained in office, US President Donald Trump began imposing additional sanctions that specifically targeted the oil industry. Between early 2019 and late 2020, the Trump administration sought to cut off every avenue that PdVSA had of accessing world oil markets, including shipping and financing and equipment supplies as well as crude and fuel trading and sales.

Impact of sanctions

Over time, the US sanctions regime has inflicted serious damage on the Venezuelan economy.

The most recent rounds of trade restrictions have been particularly damaging, as they have severely limited the country's ability to extract and monetise its most valuable resources. In practical terms, they have reduced Venezuelan oil production from 1.7mn barrels per day in 2018 to 560,000 bpd in 2021, a drop of more than 67%.

Certainly, Trump's loss to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election did generate some speculation about the possibility that US policy toward Venezuela might change. Biden and his team are generally understood to be open to the idea of softening sanctions for humanitarian reasons, on the grounds that they have wrecked the Venezuelan economy and impoverished ordinary citizens without accomplishing their goal of forcing changes in the political regime.

Even so, the sanctions regime has mostly remained in place, with minimal changes since Biden took office in January 2021. This is largely because the current administration's focus has been on domestic affairs - above all, on managing the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its fallout. But it also has something to do with the fact that there has been little appetite in Washington for the kind of political wrangling that would inevitably follow proposals for lifting the trade restrictions.

After all, Venezuela does not exactly inspire sympathy in the US public relations realm. It is a country governed by a socialist regime, led by a president who is prone to making hostile remarks about the US and about its chosen political and economic systems. And the trade restrictions are backed by Senator Marco Rubio of Florida and other well-known Republican legislators with close ties to the Cuban and Venezuelan ***immigrant*** communities.

Energy market turmoil

Now, though, there are other factors to consider. Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine*** hasn't just upset the geopolitical applecart; it's also caused turmoil on world energy markets.

With respect to oil, Brent and WTI crude prices both topped $125 per barrel earlier this week, putting them more than 50% above their starting points as of January 1, 2022. As a result, gasoline prices are soaring throughout the Western world, and consumers are complaining. They're likely to go higher in the near term, given that the US and the EU have now decided to restrict their imports of Russian crude, thereby limiting the volume of feedstock available for refining.

Moreover, prices could climb even higher in light of Russia's signal that it is willing to cut off oil supplies in order to retaliate against its critics. In a move that is sure to heighten concerns about possible shortages, Moscow announced earlier this week that it intended to freeze commodity exports up until the end of this year.

These measures and counter-measures will, of course, also affect natural gas and LNG markets, but that does not have much impact on US policy toward Caracas. However, the imminent reduction in Russian crude supplies does appear to have changed Washington's attitude considerably.

New US strategy?

Hence the reports that a delegation of high-level US officials - including Juan Gonzalez, the White House's special advisor on Latin America - travelled to Caracas during the first weekend in March for talks with the Venezuelan leadership. The Biden administration has not commented publicly on these talks, but various news sources have reported that the two sides discussed the possibility of restoring Venezuela's access to world oil markets in order to compensate for the missing Russian barrels.

Maduro then said in a televised speech on March 7 that his government had "agreed to work on an agenda going forward, issues of interest" with the US. "It seemed to me very important to be able, face to face, [to] discuss issues of maximum interest to Venezuela and the world," he remarked.

So far, these developments have not had any concrete results. The US government has not yet lifted any specific restrictions on trade with Venezuela, and PdVSA has not yet taken any specific actions to exapnd production or improve its crumbling infrastructure as a consequence of recent events. However, the outlook is definitely changing.

There may still be political battles ahead, though. Rubio and other US legislators have expressed concern about the prospect of doing business with Venezuela, with some pointing out that Maduro's regime is still engaging in political repression and others urging the Biden administration to focus instead on giving support to US oil producers.

Nevertheless, this is not the same conversation that might have been happening just a few short weeks ago.

**Load-Date:** March 14, 2022

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**Hungary pleased that Russian gas and oil remain exempt from EU sanction list**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 13, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 440 words

**Body**

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban supported the EU's plans to reduce dependency on Russian energy by 2027 at the two-day informal meeting in Brussels. EU leaders have abandoned plans to levy sanctions on Russian gas and oil, a relief for Hungary, which is dependent on Russian energy.

Before the meeting, Hungary's premier made it clear it would not support sanctions extended to the energy sector.

European Commission President has set a new target date for the EU to scale back the use of Russian energy. Speaking at the informal summit of heads of state and government in Versailles, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that by 2027 the EU is ready to provide energy security without Russian oil and gas.

To ensure that the EU is ready for the next winter season, gas storage facilities will be filled to 90% capacity by October.

The agreement in Versailles was good news for Hungary, which gets 85% of its gas needs from Russia, and nine out of 10 households use gas for cooking or heating.

"The most important issue for us has been settled favourably. There will be no sanctions covering oil and gas, which means that Hungary's energy supplies will be guaranteed in the coming period, Orban posted on Facebook after the marathon meeting.

Last September, Hungary struck two long-term contract deals with Russia's major gas company Gazprom, which provides for the deliveries of 4.5 bcm meters of gas via pipelines in Serbia and Austria, bypassing ***Ukraine***.

The agreement is for 15 years and may be reviewed after 10 years. In addition, Budapest wants to increase gas deliveries through Serbia by 1 bcm per year, and this issue was brought up by Orban during his visit to Moscow in early February but no agreement was reached.

The government's position is that Hungary condemns Russia's actions in ***Ukraine*** and provides assistance to ***refugees***, but does not want to pay the price of the conflict in higher energy prices.

Keeping energy prices is low is a key promise in Viktor Orban's re-election campaign. He froze utility prices for retail uses in 2013, which has helped him win two supermajority victories since. Nevertheless, taxpayers pay the price of state intervention.

State-utility giant MVM is expected to incur a €1.6bn deficit for selling gas and electricity below market prices this year, Julia Kiraly, chief economic advisor o the opposition alliance, told bne IntelliNews.

"EU leaders listened to the French president and German chancellor who had talks with Putin. It cannot be ruled out that the conflict will drag on. We have decided that Europe will also join ceasefire talks", Orban said.



**Load-Date:** March 14, 2022

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**FPRI BMB Ukraine: 2.5mn refugees have fled the country as fighting escalates**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 14, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 436 words

**Body**

Russia's war in ***Ukraine*** continues into its third week. As Russian bombardments escalate in Ukrainian cities, citizens have been forced to flee. The United Nations estimates 2.5mn ***refugees*** have left ***Ukraine*** since the war began, and another 2mn have fled their homes but stayed in the country.

Widespread civilian casualties have been reported in the besieged southern city of Mariupol, where officials say more than 1,500 people have been killed. There is no electricity in the city, and there are critical shortages of food, water, and medicine. A six-year-old girl died of dehydration after being trapped under the rubble of her bombed home.

Reports of a Russian airstrike on a maternity hospital in Mariupol have shocked the international community. Three people were killed, including a child, and an additional 17 were injured, according to local authorities.

"Mariupol was surrounded, blocked, is being exhausted, tortured," Ukrainian President Zelenskiy said in a video message asking for help from the West.

A ceasefire aimed at allowing citizens to evacuate from Mariupol was short-lived when Russia was accused of shelling the agreed-upon humanitarian corridor.

Similar stories of attacks targeting civilians have also been reported in other Ukrainian cities.

Zelenskiy claims that about 1,300 Ukrainian troops have been killed so far in the invasion, while he says Russian forces have lost "around 12,000 men."  These numbers are almost certainly exaggerated in both directions.

Diplomatic efforts have thus far not been successful at resolving the conflict. Last week, Zelenskiy said he was ready to compromise on the status of Crimea and the Donbas region, although a Ukrainian aide later stated that ***Ukraine*** would not cede "a single inch" of territory.

Three-way talks between the Foreign Ministers of Russia, ***Ukraine*** and Turkey in the Turkish city of Antalya failed to reach an agreement on humanitarian issues on March 10. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said "no progress" had been made toward a ceasefire at the meetings.

Ukrainian and Russian delegations have also been meeting for negotiations in Belarus.

***Ukraine*** accused Russia of planning a fake "referendum" in the Ukrainian city of Kherson. Russian forces seized the city on March 3 after a three-day siege, and are now planning to stage a referendum to pretend there is popular support for a "people's republic" in Kherson, according to Ukrainian officials.

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This article originally appeared in FPRI's BMB ***Ukraine*** newsletter. Click here to learn more about BMB ***Ukraine*** and subscribe to the newsletter.

**Load-Date:** March 15, 2022

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**Odesa braces for looming Russian assault**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 14, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 1269 words

**Body**

The war in ***Ukraine*** has burned the hottest in the country's south since the first day of the Russian invasion.

Now, with Russian troops barely 100 km away from the crucial Black Sea port of Odesa, ***Ukraine***'s third-largest city is preparing for its own version of the brutal urban combat that has engulfed Kyiv, Kharkiv and elsewhere.

The city's historic old quarter has now become a fortress, with tank traps and sandbagged positions closing off streets and providing a maze of defences against any would-be assailant.

On a sunny day in mid-March - though the weather was still biting cold, with a freezing wind coming off the sea - codenamed soldiers control access to key avenues. The guards, both enlisted members of ***Ukraine***'s armed forces and new volunteers in the recently established Territorial Defence, enforce a strict curfew at 7pm - anyone caught outside in a vehicle without the requisite papers after this time is simply shot, a measure adopted following incursions from Russian saboteurs.

The city is predictably quiet - around 150,000 of its 1mn inhabitants have fled, while most shops are closed. Some of those that remain open do so in a very different form than their normal one. One of these is the Odesa Food Market, a hall of chic restaurant stalls that now hosts one of the city's main collection points.

Humanitarian volunteers from across the city fill the interior. One of these, Inga Kordynovska, a lawyer-turned-air co-ordinator, now helps run these crucial logistics of Odesa's defence.

"There are thousands of people enrolled in Territorial Defence [forces] here," Kordynovska says. "They are a new formation that was only rolled out shortly before the war started, so we provide food and supplies to them first," she says.

The demand from the public to be involved in the city's preparations has been almost too much to handle.

"Every day I get 50 calls from people who want to help," says Kordynovska. "There's more help than there is work to do. Everyone says, `I want to do something, I can't just watch how this fucking crazy Putin ruins my country," she says.

Sure of victory

Odesa's distance from the initial frontlines has given it the time necessary to prepare: Although an obvious Russian target, Moscow's forces have to cover 250 km to reach it from occupied Crimea.

"Fortunately for us, Kyiv, Kharkiv, these were the first targets, so they bought us time to prepare," says Kordynovska. "Kyiv, they didn't have this time. We also have bomb attacks every day, but as I know from our army, we have some of the best anti-air defences [in the country] in this city," she adds.

It doesn't take long to confirm her words. Later that afternoon, a short burst of anti-air cannons rings throughout Odessa, firing upon a Russian cruise missile fired from a warship in the Black Sea towards targets deeper in ***Ukraine***.

Just as in nearby Mykolaiv - currently shielding Odesa as it faces the present Russian thrust westwards - unusually poor weather conditions have delayed a potential Russian assault.

"We normally have very warm weather here in March, around 15 degrees," says Kordynovska. "But now it's so cold and stormy, they can't attack the city [from the sea]. So every morning we pray: please, weather, please be disgusting!" she laughs.

The volunteers remain sure of victory.

"To just sit and hide helps no one," says Ivan Belogroda, a 30-year old bar manager. "[My wife and I] couldn't wait and do nothing. We tried to sign up for the Territorial Defence, but they already had too many applicants. The minimum we could do is volunteer here, to support our guys on the front," he says.

The city's past, specifically its defence against Nazi Germany in 1941, gives him confidence.

"Odesa is a [Soviet] Hero City, and it will always be," says Belogroda. "The city will never be given over to them. Even if they manage to enter, I am sure there will be a guerilla war [against them]. The people will not accept the Russians here, ever," he says.

Ready to fight

Elsewhere in the city, volunteer fighters are busy with their own preparations and deployments.

The Committee for Public Security is one such group. Their headquarters, on the edge of central Odesa, is awash with the flags of various anti-Russian armed groups: Stepan Bandera's WWII-era Ukrainian Provisional Army, the 25th Dnipro Paratrooper Brigade, and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, among others. Two dozen volunteers and support staff move about the building, stocking provisions and brandishing Kalashnikov assault rifles.

One of them tells of a saboteur his team captured on the city's streets a week prior.

"I went outside to look at some suspicious characters," says Maxim Ivanin, 36, a member of the group since its formation in 2014. "Someone saw them and told me `they look suspicious, they are wandering around there'. I go outside wearing my armband and uniform. He turns around and right away he raises his hands up, like this. I realise that the fact that he's doing this means something's off," Ivanin says.

"So we put him on a bench and start interrogating him. Right away, he takes a wallet out of his pocket and his first words are `it's not my wallet'. And there you've got all kinds of card numbers, cards of the Russian Orthodox Church, those propagandists, so he had the full package. Eventually, he cracked and admitted that he was [working for Russia] for money. The SBU [Ukrainian intelligence service] came and took him away," Ivanin says.

The group has suffered casualties, both past and present. Portraits line one wall of the office, showing fighters who fell in battle in eastern ***Ukraine*** in 2014 and 2015. There is one more recent death as well: 20-year old Anton Kompaniets, killed in fighting in Mykolaiv just that day.

More Odesa locals are joining the committee, and other groups like it, every day.

Ivanin is not surprised. "99 percent [of Ukrainians] are all as one now: ready to fight," he says.

22-year old Roman is one of those new recruits.

"I thought it would be good to help defend the city," says Roman, who studies computer science in his normal life. "I only came last week. I've never done anything with the military before," he admits.

Feelings towards the invaders are the same, regardless of ***Ukraine***'s linguistic divide.

"I'm Russian-speaking, I speak Russian all my life," says Ivanin. "I know Ukrainian too, but generally I always preferred Russian. But I can't tolerate [Russians] now. There will be no peace. Only victory," he says.

That sentiment is shared by many in Odesa. Kordynovska, the aid co-ordinator, wishes the world saw it their way.

"We are shocked at the passive position of [other countries]," she said. "I read one post today, where a guy says, `if I understand correctly, bin Laden destroyed two buildings and he is called an international terrorist. Now one crazy fucking guy destroys thousands of buildings, we will still invite him to summits, to negotiations, everything,'" Kordynovska said.

In her view, if the Russian war machine is not stopped here, it will only continue.

"Now a lot of our ***refugees*** go to Moldova," Kordynovska says. "And now Moldova understands, if Ukrainians can't stop Putin, he will come to Moldova too, then to Romania, to Poland. It's not our war, it's the world's war," she says.

While Odesa braces for the worst, Kordynovska wonders how much worse things will get.

"[Putin] destroys whole countries," she says. "How many people should die? How many people should be killed before it's enough?"

A group from the Committee of Public Safety on manoeuvres in 2015. Photo: bne IntelliNews

**Load-Date:** March 15, 2022

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**Kyrgyz court issues ban on protests near Russian embassy**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 15, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 120 words

**Body**

A court in the Kyrgyz capital city, Bishkek, has issued a ban on protests near the Russian embassy at the central Ala-Too Square and near the presidential administration buildings from March 11 until April 11, Kyrgyz local media outlets reported on March 14.

Kyrgyzstan has officially tried to maintain a neutral stance on the issue of the ***Ukraine*** conflict, though Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov's social media posts appear to lend support to Russia.

The support for Russia might be a result of Kyrgyzstan's economic dependence on Russia, which includes trade and remittances by Kyrgyz ***migrant*** workers.

At the same time, the reports suggest that demonstrations in the capital would be permitted at nearby Gorky Park.

**Load-Date:** March 15, 2022

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**Turkey may still attract some 2mn Russian tourists this year, say sector representatives**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 16, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 232 words

**Body**

Last year some 4.5mn Russians visited Turkey, and despite the ongoing uncertainties at least 2mn Russian holidaymakers may still spend their vacation in the country this year, said Bulent Bulbuloglu, head of the Turkish Hoteliers' Federation.

"Some 40% of Russian tourists who visit Turkey are middle-class Russians. I believe we'll lose tourists from this income group, but rich Russians will still be visiting Turkey. It is still too early to make solid predictions, yet I can say that at least 2mn Russian holidaymakers will vacation in Turkey this year," he said, adding that he is not optimistic about the Ukrainian market.

Mehmet Isler, head of Aegean Touristic Hotels and Accommodations Association (ETIK), agrees that it is still possible for Turkey to lure 2mn Russian tourists this year.

"Russians, who generally spend their vacation in Europe, may also turn to Turkey, but there will be no tourist inflows from ***Ukraine***," Isler said.

Demand from Germany and Holland is already strong, but bookings from across the rest of Europe are rather slow, according to Isler. "Reservations from Eastern European countries have come to halt as they are bracing for the impact of the war, struggling to cope with the ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine***."

At the start of the year, Tourism Minister Mehmet Nuri Ersoy said that Turkey was targeting the generation of $35bn in tourism revenues this year.

**Load-Date:** March 16, 2022

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**LONG READ: Winners and losers from the war in Ukraine (and Russia has already lost, even if it wins)**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 16, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 3108 words

**Body**

Russia loses from its war in ***Ukraine***, even if it wins. China wins from Russia's war in ***Ukraine*** irrespective of whether Russia wins or loses. The US also wins from both a Russian victory and a defeat, but its win is less if Russia wins. And everyone else, especially ***Ukraine***, has already lost regardless of the outcome.

Even if Russian President Vladimir Putin gets his precious security deal, he has already condemned Russia to stagnation for as long as he remains in office. The Russian people have not only lost; they have lost most of what they have gained in the last twenty years.

In the short term, Russia's growth outlook has already cut from the 2.4% growth predicted in 2022 to somewhere between 8% and 15% contraction, according to the latest CBR survey of professional economists.

As bne IntelliNews has reported many times, by building his fiscal fortress that was supposed to sanction-proof Russia, the real cost of sanctions has been to reduce Russia's growth potential to a mere 2% - well below the global growth rate. That means the economy was already going to fall slowly further and further behind the rest of the planet. With all the new sanctions Russia's growth faces even bigger impediments that have cut its expansion potential even further. The jury remains out on as to how bad it is, but some analysts suggest 1%, others nothing, and more say growth will be negative from here on in.

But Putin doesn't care. As bne IntelliNews reported in an op-ed "has Putin gone mad," for him, ensuring Russia's security now appears more important than providing prosperity for his people.

Of course the biggest looser of all is ***Ukraine***. The cost of the war for what was already one of the poorest countries in Europe is impossible to measure yet, but the range already extends from the conservative $30bn worth of damage, more than the country's entire hard currency reserves, to $565bn mentioned by ***Ukraine***'s Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal on March 16, almost three times more than the entire value of the country's economy. For comparison, the IMF's recently stand-by agreement (SBA) was for $5bn over two years.

China win-win

China has the most skin in the game, even though it is not involved in the war in any way.

"The big winner from this showdown will be China," Chris Weafer, a veteran of the Russian markets and CEO of Macro Advisory, told bne IntelliNews in a recent webcast.

"China has been able to gain access to material supply and greatly strengthened its secure supply for its economy - energy or other materials - and they are now coming across land on very secure lines from the world's biggest producer. Every time a western company is not willing to invest in a Russian project then China is there with its chequebook open - if it suits the Chinese national interest."

Christof Ruehl, the former chief economist for the World Bank in Russia and then for BP, also pointed out in another recent webcast that if the West successfully cuts Russia off from the Western energy markets then it will have to sell oil, and especially gas to Asia, at deeply discounted prices. While sanctions on Russian oil exports will be difficult to enforce, as it can be simply put on a ship and sent via ports like Singapore back into the western markets, selling gas will be much harder; Russia currently sells about 70% of its gas to the EU and earns some $35bn a year from these exports.

However, there are already plans for a Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline that would connect the giant Yamal gas fields in Russia's Arctic to China and another route via Mongolia, the Soyuz/Vostok pipeline, that also hooks Russia's hydrocarbon fields into the Chinese market. But both will take time and a lot of money to build.

"The problem is that Russia won't have any other buyers, so the Chinese will be able to get the same gas, but at a deep discount," Ruehl told bne IntelliNews.

The first signs of these new "prisoner" deals have already started to appear. On March 15 India said it may take up a Russian offer to buy crude oil and other commodities at a considerable discount, as Russian commodities are seen as toxic amid its military invasion of ***Ukraine***, Reuters reported citing two unnamed Indian officials.

"Russia is offering oil and other commodities at a heavy discount. We will be happy to take that," one of the Indian government officials told Reuters.

According to Reuters, India would also want to keep Russia on board as its key-trading partner, despite western attempts to isolate Moscow through sanctions. India imports 80% of its oil needs, but usually buys only about 2-3% from Russia. However, with prices soaring New Delhi is looking to increase cheap supplies from Russia.

Western observers doubted that Russia would forego its profits and had assumed the obvious commercial catastrophe of sanctions would deter the Kremlin from attacking ***Ukraine***. But that has been to misread Putin. The West is run on the basis of the Washington consensus where individual happiness and prosperity is at the core of the ideology. However, as bne IntelliNews has argued, Russia is driven by the Moscow Consensus, where the strength and security of the state is at the centre of the ideology and citizens are expected to sacrifice some of their prosperity for the sake of the Motherland.

Ruehl speculates that Moscow has been looking at the successful Chinese model, which is run along exactly the same lines - arguably to an even more extreme extent - and has decided this model is a workable alternative to Western liberalism.

China looking after number one

Thanks to the two competing outlooks, the resulting split between East and West starts to look like a return to the Cold War, but with China and Russia much more closely allied this time. However, that is to ignore one crucial change. The Cold War was a clash between two contradictory ideologies: capitalism vs communism. While the idea of promoting the state over the citizens is a holdover from the Soviet-era, the framework that this system is built on has been completely replaced: socialism has been abandoned and replaced with capitalism.

That has created an important restraint on China's relationship with Russia. While Beijing sympathises with Putin's geopolitical objections to the US-led unipolar world and agrees a multi-polar setup is preferable, it is not prepared to wreck its increasingly important commercial ties with the West to overtly support Russia's aggression. China is still a communist country in name, but it is now also very interested in cash too. As bne IntelliNews reported, Beijing has to strike a delicate balancing act between these two conflicting poles.

One place this is illustrated is despite the growing number of joint military exercises Beijing has conducted with Moscow in recent years, the two countries have yet to call each other "allies" in the formal sense. Similarly, when the UN Security Council (UNSC) voted to condemn Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine***, China only abstained from the vote. It was up to Russia to veto it. (Notably India also abstained from voting for much the same reasons.)

Would China welcome Russia's defeat in the ***Ukraine*** war?

Beijing supports Russia's demand that the world should run on multipolar lines, but it also has a vested commercial interest in seeing Russia defeated in the war against ***Ukraine***, Csaba Barnabas Horvath wrote in an opinion piece in Geopolitical Monitor.

"Knowing the history of Sino-Russian relations, a Russian victory doesn't seem to be in China's interest. What is in China's interest is a prolonged war of attrition, draining Russia's resources as much as possible, weakening it as much as possible, meanwhile isolating it from the West as much as possible, and with a Russian defeat at the end," Horvath argued.

Russia has never wanted to be China's junior partner, but a global power in its own right. And ironically the Kremlin sees the best way to achieve that goal as in partnership with Europe, not China. The Russians don't trust the Chinese.

bne IntelliNews asked then First Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich in an interview if Russia's long-term future was in partnership with China. He replied: "No. Our future is with Europe. We are a European country. We want to partner with Europe. China is too different and too far away."

Putin has said many times that his ultimate foreign policy goal is to build a single market "from Lisbon to Vladivostok", plans that the attack on ***Ukraine*** have wrecked. During his first term in office Putin asked for membership of the EU but was rebuffed by Jose Manuel Barroso. The fallback plan then became to set up the Eurasia Economic Union (EEU), which could later be hooked into the EU to create a giant pan-Eurasian single market of over 500mn people accounting for some 25% of global GDP, according to KPMG.

That would not have been in Beijing's interests. Better to see Russia hobbled and isolated, and forced to become a discount raw materials supplier to China, runs the argument.

"Throughout most of the history of Sino-Russian relations, Russia was an adversary, rather than an ally, of China. Russia's aim is not to become the junior partner in a Sino-Russian alliance, but to be a great power in its own right. Russia has a great power identity of its own, which means it pursues its great power agenda on its own, and as history has shown us, whenever that agenda crossed the interests of China, Moscow seldom hesitated to confront Beijing and, the stronger it was, the more it was willing to confront directly," Horvath said.

Relations between Moscow and Beijing have improved enormously since the fall of the Soviet Union, but Russia has been largely helpless for most of that time.

The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in June 2001 was a step forward toward deeper integration, but Russia blocked Beijing's request to turn it into a free trade zone, highlighting the underlying trade rivalries that remain. China's heavy investment in Central Asia, especially in the Kazakh energy business, has also made them rivals in Central Asia's strategic markets.

A victory and incorporation of ***Ukraine*** in some form will significantly strength Russia in Europe and make it more difficult for Beijing to deal with. A defeat will make Putin as dependent on China's President Xi Jinping, just as Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko is now dependent on Putin.

USA win-sorta win

The US will also be a big winner from Russia's war in ***Ukraine***. US President Joe Biden came into office intending to deal quickly with the "Russia problem" and proposed a new engagement with Russian President Vladimir Putin at a meeting in Geneva on June 16, 2021 to smooth over the tensions that have built up over the last two decades so that he could turn his attention to the growing rivalry with China. Many things were suggested for the agenda, including cybercrime and new arms control deals.

It didn't work out like that. Putin's growing belligerence has hijacked the US State Department's entire attention since December. The Russia problem got a lot worse, not better. But even before peace is found in ***Ukraine***, Putin has so thoroughly wrecked both Russia's standing in the world and the short- and long-term economic prospects, that what hopes Russia had for being a US rival have been destroyed. Before long Biden will be able to move on and turn his full attention back to China having crushed any rivalry Russia could have shown.

The one danger is if China embraces Russia as it spins out of the global community and they form an alliance. Then the challenge for Biden will have become greater. On paper the synergy between the two countries is impressive and their combined military would be a serious rival to that of the US. However, few analysts believe things will play out that way and Russia is doomed to become a Chinese raw materials appendage.

Europe lose-lose

The EU has already lost even if Russia is defeated. Putting aside the instability on the EU border and the 2.5mn ***refugees*** that have already crossed that border, Russia's war in ***Ukraine*** is already sending energy, food and commodity prices through the roof to politically problematic levels.

At the same time, the shock to the market and renewed disruption to supply chains will only stoke more inflation that was already at very high levels thanks to the coronacrisis.

Albania for one is already being destabilised and has seen protests against the impossible rate of the soaring cost of living last week. Fresh protests broke out on March 15 in Tirana, as the situation only gets worse. Everyone in the region is seeing inflation rates jump that cause similar problems or at the very least will drag on growth for the foreseeable future.

The eurozone economy will grow less than expected this year thanks to Putin's war, the European Commission said in February, as energy prices and supply chain problems jack up inflation and delay a more sustained recovery from the pandemic.

The EU executive said GDP in the single currency bloc would grow by 4% this year, instead of the 4.3% it was predicting only three months earlier. Inflation will also increase to a much stronger than expected 3.5% in 2022.

"Multiple headwinds have chilled Europe's economy this winter: the swift spread of Omicron, a further rise in inflation driven by soaring energy prices and persistent supply-chain disruptions," said EU economy commissioner Paolo Gentiloni this week.

And all this is before Putin hits out with Russia's counter-sanctions that are due to be announced next week. The severity of those sanctions is unknown. On the one hand, the EU's surprisingly harsh sanctions are being taken by the Kremlin as an act of economic war, so the riposte could be extreme; On the other Russia is itself teetering on the edge of an economic and financial crisis and the Kremlin may be unable to cut itself off from desperately needed revenues.

The rest of the world is ambivalent

The rest of the world is not better off and in most places it is worse off than the EU. Global inflation and soaring food prices hurt rich economies but they cause carnage for poorer nations where the population was already struggling to get by.

Putin must be hoping to avoid the China-dependency by turning to the G20 and the rest of the emerging world for allies and markets. And there he can already find sympathy. To his advantage is the fact that the Emerging Markets are collectively richer and more populous than the Developed Markets. To his disadvantage is individually they are all much weaker than the countries in the Western world.

"There is an unmistakable sentiment emerging across Asia, Africa and the Arab world that Europe is throwing itself into a disaster over ***Ukraine*** and that the international order itself is crumbling," Radha Stirling wrote in an op-ed in The Times of Israel. "While Western nations are rushing headlong into the crisis, countries in the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific rim and Africa are busy calculating the ramifications for their own peoples and trying to anticipate what a de-globalised future holds."

"While Western unity over the ***Ukraine*** issue appears to be a show of strength, the wider world sees profound self-sabotage that may well lead to continental chaos in the coming years, and which signifies American withdrawal from the post-WWII global order. Many see Russian sanctions, and their inevitable destructive impact on Europe, as part of the long-discussed American pivot to Asia," Stirling concluded.

Fifty-two nations either abstained or simply didn't vote in the UN resolution condemning the Russian invasion of ***Ukraine***, and their silence could be interpreted, not as condoning of the invasion, nor as hostility to the West, but as ambivalence about the emerging new international order implied by the vote.

Stirling points out that in the Arab world the outrage of a big country invading a smaller one in the western world smacks of hypocrisy after the US travelled 6,000 miles to invade one of their neighbours on made-up evidence, whereas Russia has invaded a country that has received significant arms and money from Russia's rival, the US, and was seeking to join an alliance that Russia perceives as hostile to it.

There are more practical considerations for the Arab world's ambivalence to the ***Ukraine*** war too. Removing a third of the world's grain supply with hurt the Middle East more than anyone, which depends on Russia and ***Ukraine*** for a third of its grain imports. A food price shock bigger than the one that sparked the Arab spring in 2011 is now almost certain to hit in the middle of this year.

"Russia and ***Ukraine*** together are largely responsible for feeding the Middle East, so no one in the region is eager to beat the drums of war, because any prolongation of the conflict will undoubtedly lead to catastrophic food insecurity, instability and civil unrest," says Stirling, adding that the blow will be doubly damaging, coming on the heels, as it does, of the coronavirus (COVID) shock.

"No one is ready to embrace this tsunami of economic consequences for the sake of ***Ukraine***'s aspirations to join Nato," says Stirling.

The West's zeal to punish and isolate Russia will residually punish countries in the Global South where Russia has been working hard to build up economic, energy and security relations with many countries.

In recently years the Arabs have begun to actively invest into Russia and even bailed the government out in 2016 when it found a huge RUB2 trillion hole in the budget it could not fill with the faux privatisation of a 19.5% stake in the state-owned Rosneft in December that year.

OPEC countries in particular are being asked to ramp up oil production, but they don't see the US following similar policies. The UEA and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, two of the US closest allies in the Middle East, have refused to take calls from the US president throughout the crisis, but appear to have been in regular communication with Moscow, reports The Times of Israel.

"There is talk of resurrecting the Non-Aligned Movement of the Cold War period floating in the ether across the developing world, with countries from the Gulf to the Far East predicting that they will have to fend for themselves and carve out new economic and political alliances in the absence of Western hegemony," Stirling says. "The war in ***Ukraine*** looks like a watershed moment to many in the Global South, and they feel more than ever that they have to choose their friends carefully."

**Load-Date:** March 17, 2022

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**Russia bombs Mariupol theatre sheltering hundreds of women and children**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 17, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 744 words

**Body**

The Ukrainian government claims that Russia dropped a powerful bomb on the Mariupol Drama Theatre where hundreds of mostly women and children were sheltering from the bombardment of the city on March 16.

The theatre was a well-known ***refugee*** point used by locals to avoid the shelling of the city. A satellite image released by the private US company Maxar Technologies shows the words "Children" painted on the ground in front and back of the building that is clearly visible from the air as of March 14.

Mariupol has been in the front line of Russian aggression, which escalated and went into its fourth phase at the weekend. The city has been surrounded making escape almost impossible and Russian forces have been shelling it relentlessly.

The Ukrainian foreign ministry said many people were trapped in the theatre and accused Russia of committing a war crime, Reuters reports.

The number of casualties is not yet known but given the power of the bomb the authorities fear the worst. Video and photos of the wreckage circulating on social media show the build as almost completely destroyed.

"The plane dropped a bomb on a building where hundreds of peaceful Mariupol residents were hiding," the authorities said.

"It is still impossible to estimate the scale of this horrific and inhumane act, because the city continues to shell residential areas," the council wrote on Telegram as cited by CNN. "It is known that after the bombing, the central part of the Drama Theatre was destroyed, and the entrance to the bomb shelter in the building was destroyed," it added.

Mariupol City Council, who shared an image of the destroyed building, said Russian forces had "purposefully and cynically destroyed the Drama Theatre in the heart of Mariupol."

An adviser to the mayor of Mariupol, Petro Andruishchenko, said the theatre was the largest shelter in the city both "in number and size". Rescue workers have been trying to dig survivor out of the rubble, including pregnant women who were taking refuge at the theatre.

"More than a thousand people were hiding there" Andruishchenko as cited by CNN, but "the probability of getting there to dismantle the rubble is low due to constant shelling and bombing of the city," he added.

The bombardment of the city started on March 1 but civilians have struggled to escape. However, some 20,000 ***refugees*** managed to leave the city on March 15 during a brief lull in the shelling. More than 2.5mn Ukrainians have now fled the country since Russia attacked on ***Ukraine*** on February 24.

"It is impossible to find words that could describe the level of cruelty and cynicism with which the Russian occupiers are destroying the civilian population of the Ukrainian city by the sea. Women, children, and the elderly remain in the enemy's sights. These are completely unarmed peaceful people," the city council said as cited by CNN. "We will never forgive and never forget."

Russia denies it was responsible and said it does not target civilians. The Russian defence ministry said its forces had not struck the building and accused ***Ukraine***'s far-right Azov Battalion of blowing it up, Russia's RIA news agency said.

Azov troops have been active in  the city and taken up positions in residential builds, according to unverified reports on social media. Azov troops were also reportedly at the Mariupol maternity hospital that was destroyed by Russian shelling on March 9. However, the maternity hospital appears to have been largely evacuated before the strike. The official death toll by Ukrainian authorities was of three dead, although a heavily pregnant woman, who was wounded in the attack later died and her child was still born, according to reports. It has not been possible to verify the claims that Azov fighters were in the maternity hospital either.

Russia had previously claimed that Azov troops have been of preventing civilians from leaving the city and using them as a human shield.

At least 2,500 civilians have died in Mariupol according to the official estimates earlier this week, but that number has almost certain risen dramatically as a result of the bombing of the Mariupol theatre bombing. Hundreds of thousands of people remain trapped in the city, with officials warning those who remain are without electricity, water and heat.

In a glimmer of hope, peace talks between Russia and ***Ukraine*** seem to be gathering momentum as the gap  between the two sides narrowed on March 16.

**Load-Date:** March 17, 2022

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**Zelenskiy rebukes Germany for realising too late what Russia is, says tear down the wall between peace and strife**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 18, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 763 words

**Body**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy roasted German lawmakers during a video address on March 17, rebuking them for realising too late what Russia is and calling on the Bundestag to "tear down this wall" between peace and war in Europe.

Zelenskiy has become increasingly angry with ***Ukraine***'s European partners after Nato made it clear that it would not come to Kyiv's rescue after Russia's attack on ***Ukraine*** on February 24.

Nato

In a particularly angry comments made to foreign correspondents on March 4 shortly after the war started he lambasted Nato for refusing to join Ukrainian in defence of the country or close the skies to Russian ariel attack.

"If you can't close the sky now, then give a deadline when it will happen. If you can't do it now, tell me how many people have to explode, how many arms, legs, heads have to fly to reach you? Tell me how many. I'll go to count and wait for this moment," Zelenskiy told reporters.

That admonishment became particularly poignant after a Russian bomber destroyed a theatre in Mariupol on March 16 where an estimated 500 ***refugees***, mostly women and children, were taking shelter with massive loss of life.

The Ukrainian president has now given up on ambitions to join the military alliance and said ***Ukraine*** would no longer pursue Nato membership in an interview with ABC News on 7 March.

Appearing on a screen in his now trademark khaki t-shirt and with dark rings under his eyes as well as several days of stubble, Zelenskiy was welcomed by MPs in the Bundestag with a standing ovation. Addressing the Bundestag Zelenskiy thanked Germany for assistance, but stressed that "many steps to support [***Ukraine***] were late and insufficient," according to an Ukrinform correspondent.

Germany has been the most reluctant to punish Russia for its aggression against ***Ukraine*** as it has by far the largest commercial interests in Russia. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz dragged his heels in commitments to shutter the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline should Russia invade, in the days before the invasion happened. But when it did he immediately made it impossible for the pipeline to gain regulatory approval, effectively mothballing the project for the immediate future.

Germany has also refused to allow the delivery of offensive weapons to ***Ukraine***, citing German laws that forbid the delivery of weapons to "crisis zones." Berlin was ridiculed when all it sent in the run up to the war was 5,000 helmets.

Zelenskiy pointed to the close ties between German and Russian businesses. Russia has been a large and extremely lucrative market for German engineering giant Siemens and Germany has ten-time the number of companies register in Russia than any other EU ally.

Zelenskiy said ***Ukraine*** had long warned that the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was part of preparation for war, "but in response, it heard only: economy, economy, economy."

Zelenskiy also took a swipe at Scholz's rebuttal to Putin's demand that ***Ukraine*** be locked out of Nato, saying that the issue was "not on the table and not in the foreseeable future" adding that he didn't understand why the Kremlin was making such a fuss.

The situation is similar with the issue of ***Ukraine***'s EU membership. "For many, it's politics, but it's the stone for a new wall," he warned.

Zelenskiy took some time out to thank ordinary Germans for welcoming ***refugees*** streaming out of the warzone. As of March 17 more than 3mn people had left the country with 1.5mn going to Poland, but an estimated 100,000 having already crossed the border to Germany where they have been invited into private homes and warmly received.

But Zelenskiy could not hold back the obvious bitterness he feels at being left to face the might of the Russian army along and threw one of Germany's most iconic phrases back into the faces of the lawmakers. "Every year they repeat in Germany: "Never again." But these words are worthless today," which refers to Germany's commitment to never repeat the atrocity of the rise of the Nazis.

Zelenskiy concluded his speech by echoing US President Ronald Reagan famous taunt to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev during a trip to Berlin during the Cold War: "Mr. President, tear down this wall!"

"It's not a Berlin Wall - it is a Wall in central Europe between freedom and bondage and this Wall is growing bigger with every bomb' dropped on ***Ukraine***," he told MPs.

Zelenskiy said: "And I ask you, dear Chancellor, to tear down this wall, to give Germany the leading role it deserves. Support ***Ukraine***, stop this war, help us stop this war!"

**Load-Date:** March 18, 2022

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**Eastern EU member states divided over sanctions on Russian oil and gas exports**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 18, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 3517 words

**Body**

The West is cranking up the economic pressure on Russia to try to force it to withdraw from ***Ukraine*** but, despite the demands of Kyiv and some of its allies in Central and Southeastern Europe, the European Union is still baulking at imposing sanctions on Russian energy exports.

The Kremlin receives an estimated 40% of its budget revenues from energy exports, so interrupting these flows could have a crippling effect on the Russian war machine. At current prices investment bank Standard Chartered has estimated that EU countries are paying Russia roughly $550mn a day for oil, equivalent to $200bn a year.

Washington and London have already imposed sanctions on Russian energy, though the UK's measures only apply to oil and will only take full effect by the end of the year.

But only an estimated 10% of US energy and 8% of the UK's comes from Russia. For Europe the cost would be much higher, particularly given the way the way it is so tightly connected to Russia's network of gas pipelines. This gas supply could only be fully substituted with other sources - mainly liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments - once new infrastructure is built.

Even for oil there would be significant substitution difficulties, given that several refineries are directly connected to pipelines from Russia and are specially adapted to handle its high-sulphur content.

Overall, Europe relies on Russia for some 35% of its gas and 30% of its oil, the prices of which are already soaring amid the feared tightening of supply. Sanctions would only drive prices even higher, creating further misery for Europe's consumers. It would also cause more stoppages at highly gas-dependent industries such as fertiliser producers.

On March 10 an EU summit failed to back energy sanctions, with Germany warning that it would be plunged into recession if it suddenly lost access to Russian gas and oil. Russia provides around one third of Germany's oil consumption, half its coal and 55% of its gas.

German Economic and Energy Minister Robert Habeck said that his government was looking to phase out Russian oil by the end of the year, but ending the country's dependence on gas would be a much longer-term proposition. He warned of "mass unemployment, poverty, people who can't heat their homes, people who run out of petrol" if Germany stopped using Russian oil and gas.

Instead the summit tasked the Commission with producing proposals by mid-May on how to achieve the target of freeing the EU from dependency on Russian gas, oil and coal by 2027. The bloc aims to reduce imports of Russian gas by 100bn cubic metres - or two thirds - by the end of 2022.

The debate may be over for now and yet Germany has already reversed course over exports of offensive arms to ***Ukraine*** and approving Russia's Nordstream 2 gas pipeline. There remains some hope that it might again be persuaded to take stronger measures. This could bring other waverers round, particularly if Russia continues bombing residential areas or unleashes chemical weapons.

If so, the first step is likely to be oil sanctions, given the difficulty the bloc will already have finding enough gas to fulfil its plan to make its underground stocks 90% full by the start of October for the coming winter.

Oil will also be much more painful for the Kremlin as it is more lucrative - in 2021, Russia generated almost three times more revenue from oil exports than from gas. Though oil is more fungible, Russia will still have a hard job finding alternative buyers for its production, given its high sulphur content.

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), European OECD members import approximately 3.1mn barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil, largely Urals crude. Almost 1mn bpd comes via the 5,000-km Druzhba (Friendship) pipeline from central Russia to refineries in Poland, Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

The IEA estimates that some 2.5mn bpd of Russian oil and products - of which crude accounts for 1.5mn bpd - already may not find buyers beginning in April, as oil companies and traders become increasingly wary of falling foul of potential sanctions.

Russian oil producers are reportedly having difficulty selling their oil on international markets and are having to offer discounts of up to 30% to ship their products, creating a widening spread between the prices of Brent and Urals crude.

Moreover, as relations between the EU and Russia continue to worsen, the Kremlin has signalled that it might itself switch off the tap and refuse to sell gas and oil to Europe, even though this would be very costly and would also wreck its reputation in the markets.

Central and Southern European countries are among the most vulnerable to any cut-off in Russian energy exports, but this has not stopped some of them from being very vocal in demanding tougher action, with Poland and the Baltic states as always in the vanguard, and Bulgaria and Hungary dragging their feet.

Over the past few years CEE countries have made big efforts to reduce their dependence on Russian gas, by accessing other producers via new pipelines and LNG terminals. Most countries now avoid long-term contracts with Gazprom and instead private or semi-private operators make deals at spot prices with traders.

But many CEE countries remain very dependent, especially on gas. According to Statista, in 2020 the highest gas dependence on Russia in Central Europe was in the Baltic states, with Latvia on 93% and Estonia on 79%, though Lithuania had cut its dependence to 41% through the opening of the Klapeida LNG terminal.

Among the larger states, Slovakia is the most dependent at 70%, with Czechia on 66%. Poland has cut its dependence to 40%, partly through the Swinoujscie LNG terminal. Hungary's dependence is only at 40%, as it has benefited from its geographical position at the crossroads of east-west and north-south pipelines.

In terms of oil, among the most dependent are the Slovakia, Poland and Bulgaria.

Below bne IntelliNews correspondents report on how vulnerable Central and Southern European EU members are to any cut-off of Russian oil and gas, and look at what stance their governments are taking on sanctions.

Poland

Despite being quite dependent on Russian energy commodity imports, Poland has been at the forefront of sanctioning them to cut off Russia from a key source of income.

"Russia uses fuels and energy commodities - its most profitable source of income - to finance its military [and] as a tool of political and economic blackmail as well as cross-border corruption," Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki wrote in a letter to fellow EU leaders last week.

Poland is one of Europe's heaviest users of Russian oil, importing some two-thirds of demand - 16.4mn tonnes in nominal terms (2020 data). The Plock refinery is specially customised to handle the high sulphur crude oil supplies from Russia.

Poland also remains quite dependent on Russian gas, with imports accounting for 55% of demand. Unlike oil, however, Poland is on the brink of bringing down Russian gas imports to zero. That is thanks to the Baltic Pipe - a gas link from Norway via Denmark - that is becoming operational by November and reaching full capacity of 10 bcm of gas annually from January 1. The Baltic Pipe will displace Russian imports in their entirety, with the rest of the demand covered by the LNG terminal in Swinoujscie - currently being expanded to 7.5 bcm a year by 2023 - domestic production and a planned floating LNG terminal in Gdansk Bay.

Replacing oil will be more challenging but, over time, Poland could replace Russian imports by opening up new routes of supply. The Polish Economic Institute (PIE), a state economic think-tank, points to Norway, the US, or even Iran and Venezuela, recently back in the oil game after the US began looking for replacements of imported Russian oil.

Saudi Arabia may also be looking to step in for Russia on the Polish market after the Polish government sold Saudi Aramco a 30% stake in refiner Lotos in a deal that was a condition of merging Lotos with PKN Orlen.

Poland already had to manage a drop in oil imports from Russia in 2019. Poland ramped up purchases from Saudi Arabia and other producers after the Druzhba pipeline was taken offline for 46 days after millions of barrels of oil were contaminated with organic chlorides.

Hungary

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban supported the EU's plans to reduce dependency on Russian energy by 2027 at the two-day summit in Brussels and was relieved that EU leaders abandoned plans to levy sanctions on Russian gas and oil. Before the meeting, Hungary's premier had made it clear it would not support sanctions extended to the energy sector.

The agreement in Versailles was good news for Hungary, which gets 55% of its oil and 85% of its gas needs from Russia, with nine out of 10 households using gas for cooking or heating.

"The most important issue for us has been settled favourably. There will be no sanctions covering oil and gas, which means that Hungary's energy supplies will be guaranteed in the coming period," Orban posted on Facebook after the marathon meeting.

Last September, Hungary struck two long-term contract deals with Russia's major gas company Gazprom, which provides for the deliveries of 4.5 bcm of gas via pipelines in Serbia and Austria, bypassing ***Ukraine***.

The agreement is for 15 years and may be reviewed after 10 years. In addition, Budapest wants to increase gas deliveries through Serbia by 1 bcm per year. This issue was brought up by Orban during his visit to Moscow in early February but no agreement was reached. Budapest also has access to LNG supplies from an LNG terminal in Croatia.

The government's position is that Hungary condemns Russia's actions in ***Ukraine*** and provides assistance to ***refugees***, but does not want to pay the price of the conflict in higher energy prices.

"While we condemn Russia's armed offensive and we also condemn the war, we will not allow Hungarian families to be made to pay the price," Orbán said on March 8. The sanctions must not concern oil and gas," he said. "The Hungarian economy just cannot work without Russian fossil fuels."

Keeping energy prices is low is a key promise in Viktor Orban's re-election campaign. He froze utility prices for retail uses in 2013, which has helped him win two supermajority victories since.

Nevertheless, taxpayers pay the price of state intervention. State-utility giant MVM is expected to incur a €1.6bn deficit for selling gas and electricity below market prices this year, Julia Kiraly, chief economic advisor of the opposition alliance, told bne IntelliNews.

Czechia

The Czech government has so far taken an ambiguous position on sanctions on Russian energy. Before the EU summit in Paris, the Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said that cutting off Russian oil and gas immediately "is not the way to go". Fiala said he fully supports efforts to wean the EU off Russian gas and wants this to happen as soon as possible. "But it certainly won't be this year," he said, as quoted by daily DenikN.

According to experts approached by daily e15, Czechia is dependent on Russian oil for 29% of its requirements and Russian gas for close to 100% of its needs.

Czechia has oil and petroleum product stocks available for more than three months, thus exceeding the European limit. In terms of gas, there are currently reserves of approximately 800mn cubic metres, which should last for more than a month at current daily gas consumption levels.

"In the Czech Republic, obligatory supply volume for gas traders is set and must ensure supplies to households, healthcare facilities, etc. ... at least 30% of these supplies must be secured through gas storage facilities," said Rene Nedela, Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade for Energy. The rest of the supplies are purchased on short-term and spot markets.

"In case of cutting-off Russian gas imports, the existing stocks from domestic reserves would have to be used up and, with a high probability, consumption would have to be reduced," warned Radek Novak, an economic analyst at Ceska Sporitelna bank.

"If the price were to remain at the current high levels of around €200 per MWh for a longer period of time, the end prices for households would increase eight times compared to last year and for companies seven times," he said, adding that this, given the industrial nature of the Czech economy, would have a significant impact on the domestic production of construction materials, the chemical industry, food processing and metallurgy.

"Therefore, I would see an embargo on imports of energy raw materials from Russia as the strongest possible sanction - and I would prefer it first for oil and then as a last resort for gas," Novak said.

The Czech petrochemical group Orlen Unipetrol confirmed on March 11 it has sufficient oil reserves and its fuel production is sufficient to cover the current demand in the Czech Republic, therefore, it is prepared for a possible cut-off of oil supplies from Russia.

Slovakia

Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger has taken a strong stance on sanctions but it is unclear if he has the full support of his coalition.

Before the EU summit, Heger said EU members must quickly and completely disconnect themselves from Russian energy, including nuclear fuel. "We need to send a signal to Putin that we plan to cut ourselves off all energy from Russia," he said.

"We're working on securing alternative sources of gas, oil and nuclear fuel to the largest possible extent," added Heger, as quoted by the Slovak News Agency.

But Economy Minister Richard Sulík, leader of the right-wing Eurosceptic SaS party, said a ban would hurt the EU more than Russia in the short term. "If the entire EU bans imports of Russian gas and oil, the consequences for Slovak industry would be devastating," Sulík said.

Slovakia is 85% dependent on Russian gas imports and 100% on Russian oil. The country said it does not plan to use its veto right if the EU decides to launch sanctions on Russia's gas or oil.

"We would not block a proposal within the EU to ban the import of these energy raw materials, but in such a case, we expect the EU to ensure energy security and compensation," said the state secretary of the economy ministry, Karol Galek.

Ex-PM and current chair of the opposition Smer-SD Robert Fico said that cutting off Russian supplies would mean a sharp increase in fuel prices. He pointed out that Slovakia would also lose revenue in terms of transit. In the event of a sharp increase in the price of gas and oil, he said it is necessary to count on a rise in the price of all goods.

Slovak President Zuzana Caputova said that anyone maintaining that Slovakia should remain dependent on Russian gas is acting against the interests of Slovakia, stressing that the EU has to reduce its dependence on Russian oil and gas without delay due to the new security and geopolitical situation.

In a response, according to the news agency, Fico called Caputova "political polystyrene", claiming that she and her arguments have been sunk hundreds of times, but she always resurfaces to repeat American propaganda, according to the news agency.

"[Smer-SD] is simply convinced that an immediate embargo on Russian gas and oil would be an economic murder of the Slovak public. And it's not just us saying this. The European Commission itself, virtually all EU prime ministers confirm that reducing dependence on Russian gas and oil will require a difficult and expensive 10-year effort. That's why the EU summit didn't agree on a sanction to stop the import of Russian gas and oil, just as it didn't agree, sensibly, that the EU can immediately accept an unprepared ***Ukraine*** as a new member," he was quoted by the news agency as saying.

He called on both PM and president to stop such statements, asking whether it's in the interest of the Slovak public to pay €3 per a litre for petrol "in the name of fulfilling American dreams of weakening Russia".

Baltic states

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis backed an embargo on Russian energy on March 7. "Energy sources which we import pay for the Russian military operation," he said in a joint news conference with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. "We cannot pay for oil and gas with the blood of ***Ukraine***."

Lithuania has stopped imports of small cargoes of Russian LNG via the Baltic port of Klaipeda. Small LNG cargoes were regularly brought to Klaipeda from the Russian port of Vysotsk, where Russian company Novatek has its production facility.

Russian gas accounted for approximately 20% of the total volume handled by the Klaipeda LNG terminal last year.

However, the neighbouring Baltic states of Latvia and Estonia are much more dependent on Russian energy, and would find it very difficult to implement any sanctions on Russian exports.

Romania

Romania's mainstream political parties have not commented about the European Union's plans to cut natural gas and oil imports from Russia, perhaps because broad support for such a step is assumed.

Nevertheless, the country remains quite dependent on Russian energy imports. Romania produces some 30% of the crude oil it consumes but half the remainder is imported from Russia.

Romania also produces some 80% of the natural gas it consumes, but most of the rest is supplied by Russia's Gazprom and the options for alternative natural gas supplies are scarce.

Another problem is that the local storage capacities are insufficient to allow extraction covering consumption on cold winter days - when the consumption increases and the extraction capacity diminishes.

Therefore, in case of an abrupt decrease of the availability of Russian natural gas, it is possible that some industrial consumers might have to discontinue operations. Anyway, because of the high gas prices now in the market, the biggest consumer - the Azomures fertilizers producer - suspended operations during the winter.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria has said it would need some kind of exclusion from EU energy sanctions against Russia. The country is almost completely dependent on deliveries by Gazprom that comprise nearly 80% of all gas supplies. Previous governments have not made efforts to diversify the gas deliveries. Its only oil refinery is owned by Russia's Lukoil, and this provides over 60% of the fuel used in the country.

"We are working with the European Union to make the measures as strong as possible, but we cannot afford to stop oil and gas imports," Petkov said as quoted by The Sofia Globe.

He added that the country must diversify its gas suppliers as much as possible and that he will inspect progress on the Greek gas interconnector next week.

"Until we have real diversification we are very dependent and this should be a huge priority for Bulgaria," Petkov said.

State-owned gas supplier Bulgargaz is more optimistic that Bulgaria could cover all its energy consumption needs without importing Russian gas, once its current contract with Gazprom expires at the end of 2022. Ivan Topchijski, the chairman of the board of directors,  said it plans to purchase all available gas volumes under an agreement with Azerbaijan after June 30, including by using alternative networks in case that the completion of the Greece-Bulgaria interconnector is delayed again. Local media have reported that the launch of the Greece-Bulgaria interconnector could be delayed until the autumn of 2022.

Bulgargaz also plans to import liquefied natural gas from several sources so that it can further diversify the energy supply. Bulgaria can use two liquefied gas terminals in Greece and five in Turkey. However, Topchijski said that the price of gas from alternative sources for short-term deliveries would be too high and the company is working on signing long-term supply contracts.

Slovenia

Slovenia has not made any public statements about energy sanctions but Prime Minister Janez Jansa has urged the EU to end its reliance on Russian energy as soon as possible.

Slovenian Infrastructure Minister Jernej Vrtovec also called on the EU to impose an embargo on the imports of Russian oil and gas as soon as possible, arguing that this is the only way to secure peace in ***Ukraine***.

Slovenia's reliance on Russian gas is 51%.

Croatia

Croatia has also kept a low profile on the question of sanctions, with the government taking pains to point out that it could survive them.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said at the end of February that the floating LNG (FLNG) terminal off the island of Krk will secure enough gas in case Russia stops natural gas deliveries.

The terminal, with annual import capacity of 2.6 bcm, is a strategic project for Croatia, as it will improve security of supply for Croatia and other countries in the region.

Plenkovic has said that the terminal secures Croatia alternative sources of natural gas supplies.

Reporting by Robert Anderson in Prague, Wojciech Kosc in Warsaw. Linas Jegelevicius in Vilnius, Iulian Ernst in Bucharest, Denitsa Koseva in Sofia, and Clare Nuttall in Glasgow.

**Load-Date:** March 18, 2022

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**Biden to meet Duda in Warsaw on Friday**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 21, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 398 words

**Body**

US President Joe Biden will arrive in Poland on March 25 as part of his European tour to bolster the West's unity against Russia and to show support for ***Ukraine***, the White House said on March 20.

Biden will meet his Polish counterpart Andrzej Duda in Warsaw, the first official meeting of the two leaders. Following Russia's attack on ***Ukraine*** on February 24, Poland has become Nato's frontline country and a focus of the alliance's effort to strengthen its deterrence capacity. Warsaw is also one of the EU's hawks in terms of response to the Russian aggression, advocating an embargo on Russian oil, gas, and coal, as well halting all trade with Russia and its ally Belarus.

Poland has also taken in more than 2.1mn Ukrainian war ***refugees***, by far the most of the overall 3.5mn ***refugees*** that have sought safety in neighbouring countries.

Biden will fly back to the US immediately after meeting Duda, which ends speculation that he might visit ***Ukraine***.

"The trip will be focused on continuing to rally the world in support of the Ukrainian people and against President Putin's invasion of ***Ukraine***, but there are no plans to travel into ***Ukraine***," the White House's press secretary Jen Psaki said on Twitter.

So far, the only leaders to have gone to ***Ukraine*** to offer support were the prime ministers of Poland, Czechia, and Slovenia last week.

While in Warsaw, "the president will discuss how the United States, alongside our allies and partners, is responding to the humanitarian and human rights crisis that Russia's unjustified and unprovoked war on ***Ukraine*** has created," Psaki said in a statement.

Biden will be coming to Poland after taking part in the extraordinary summit of Nato on March 24 as well as meeting the leaders of G7 and the European Union to "discuss international efforts to support ***Ukraine*** and impose severe and unprecedented costs on Russia for its invasion," Psaki said of Biden's European agenda.

Poland has proposed an international - possibly Nato-led - peacekeeping mission in ***Ukraine***, a surprising idea that has been shunned by top EU political figures like German Chancellor Olaf Scholz or the European Council President Charles Michel. But the US Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said that while the US will not send its troops to ***Ukraine***, it was up to other Nato members whether to do so. Denmark has also said it might take part.

**Load-Date:** March 22, 2022

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**Hungary's OTP mulls withdrawal from Russian market**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 21, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 400 words

**Body**

OTP Bank, Hungary's biggest commercial lender, is weighing a possible withdrawal from the Russian market, according to a statement posted on its website.

OTP is fully subordinating the operations of its Russian subsidiary to international sanctions and continues to reduce its corporate loan portfolio in the country. The statement came a day after Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba called on consumers to boycott large international companies that have not yet withdrawn from the Russian market. Among companies, he named OTP.

The Hungarian lender said it will not provide financing to its subsidiary bank in Russia and will suspend the purchase of Russian securities.

The statement suggests that OTP is weighing the possibility of leaving the market. After the release of the 2021 earnings report earlier this month, chairman-CEO Sandor Csanyi said OTP is planning for the long term in both countries and not planning to quit Russia.

OTP Bank Russia had an after-tax profit of HUF37.6bn (€100mn) last year, the parent bank's fourth-quarter earnings report shows. OTP Bank ***Ukraine***'s after-tax profit reached HUF39bn in 2021. Both lenders each accounted for close to 8% of OTP's group-level earnings.

OTP's Russian unit had total assets of HUF800bn (or 2.9% of the total), net loans of HUF621bn (3.9%), and equity of HUF241bn (7.9%) at the end of 2021.

The equity investment in the Russian bank was included in OTP's balance sheet at the end of 2021 at a net book value of HUF74bn.

OTP also affirmed its support for its bank in ***Ukraine*** in the statement. Earlier this month, OTP said half of the 80 branches in the country were operating.

"OTP Group is supporting ***Ukraine*** using all means available to us. We are working under wartime conditions to keep the country's financial infrastructure, and thereby the economy as a whole, operational. In addition to maintaining the operations of our subsidiary in ***Ukraine***, we are contributing to the management of the crisis with the support of millions of euros, material donations, the collection of hundreds of thousands of euros worth of humanitarian donations among our employees and clients, and the accommodation and care of 160 ***refugees***," the bank said.

At the end of 2021, the Ukrainian subsidiary's total assets stood HUF984bn (or 3.6% of the total), its net loans amounted to HUF614bn (3.9%) and its equity stood at HUF160bn (5.3%).

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**Czech billionaire Karel Komarek considering cutting links with Russian Gazprom due to Ukrainian war**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 21, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 520 words

**Body**

Czech billionaire Karel Komarek, owner of the investment company KKCG group, said he is seeking to cut his links with Russian energy giant Gazprom due to Russia´s invasion of ***Ukraine***, according to Bloomberg.

Komarek said he has been in discussions with the Czech government about how to remove Gazprom from the longstanding gas storage joint venture between his oil and gas production company MND (Moravske Naftove Doly) and Gazprom Germania.

According to one bne IntelliNews source, the government is examining whether it can somehow seize or at least freeze Gazprom's shareholding. Gas storage has become an even more strategic business since the EU agreed this month that member states should bring gas storage levels up to 90% capacity by the start of this October to prepare for the coming winter, so that the bloc is not so dependent on flows of Russian gas.

The joint venture was created in 2013, to build an underground gas storage facility in Damborice, South Moravia for CZK2.5bn (€100mn).

"Gazprom is a strategic partner for us. We highly appreciate creating a joint venture with one of the largest companies in the world. In the future, we are planning further joint projects not only in the Czech Republic, but also in Europe and the Russian Federation," said Komarek back in 2013.

Now after the Russian attack on ***Ukraine*** he is considering his position: "There are very few options to fully divest from Russian gas in Eastern Europe ... What we want to do is free ourselves from Russian involvement without putting ordinary Czech citizens at risk, in the middle of winter," said Komarek, according to Bloomberg.

In an open letter, Komarek has also condemned Russia's actions in ***Ukraine*** and listed his support for Ukrainian ***refugees***.

"It is a senseless act of aggression that must be condemned in the strongest possible terms, and we are doing all we can to support the brave Ukrainians impacted by the barbarism of Vladimir Putin's regime," Komarek was quoted by itv.com as saying. "I took the decision many years ago to divest and exit from Russian assets with the exception of a shareholding in a gas terminal which we have been trying to exit for a number of years and a 50/50 joint-venture with Gazprom on an underground gas storage facility in the Czech Republic," he added.

In spring 2021, Gazprom further strengthened its links with MND when its local affiliate Vemex agreed to buy most of the gas produced by MND. MND, which is co-owned by E.ON Ruhrgas, KKGC, Slovakia´s Slovensky Plynarensky Priemysel and Gaz de France, kept a few percent of the production it needed for its own operations.

Vemex supplies gas to 12 of the 35 largest Czech companies, including PKN's Ceska Rafinerska, Vitkovice Steel, brewer Plzensky Prazdroj and Pilsen Steel. For Gazprom, this is a significant strengthening of its position on the market. In addition to supplying gas to Vemex, it also supplies RWE Transgas, which is the dominant supplier of natural gas in the Czech Republic.

For the whole of 2020, MND reported a net profit of CZK64mn and sales of CZK45.7bn (up from CZK227mn a year earlier).

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**Perspectives | Russian invasion dealing China a Silk Road economic setback**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 21, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 1272 words

**Body**

Sanctions on Russia are sidetracking China's Silk Road Rail Corridor - disrupting freight traffic and creating losses for China - while forcing Beijing to rethink regional trade, development and security strategies. But the most severe long-term consequences may be felt in Kazakhstan.

Boosting rail traffic running from China to the European Union via a web of routes through Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus is a key element in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a $1 trillion vision unveiled by Chinese leader Xi Jinping in 2013 to project Beijing's economic and political influence around the world. Rail traffic through Russian territory ran on schedule during the first few weeks after Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine***, as orders initiated prior to the war completed their transcontinental journeys. But while transit via the sanctioned Russian Railways is still technically possible, a growing number of logistics companies have effectively halted BRI-related operations through Russia.

On March 10, for example, DB Schenker, a prominent German third-party logistics provider announced it was temporarily suspending "land, air and ocean transport" to and from Russia. A day earlier, another logistics giant, Hapag-Lloyd, confirmed it is no longer accepting bookings involving Russia, Belarus and ***Ukraine***. Also on March 9, a statement issued by the inland Port of Duisburg in Germany, a key hub for BRI shipments, noted that international insurers are likely to stop offering coverage for shipments transiting Russia and Belarus.

The financial fallout from the Silk Road rail breakdown is affecting China in a variety of ways. Not only is the war starting to cost Beijing lost trade revenue, it is also turning infrastructure investments into white elephants. One such project is the Great Stone Industrial Park situated about 15 miles outside the Belarusian capital, Minsk. The $2 billion, Chinese-financed complex was billed as a trade and IT hub but was mostly a goodwill gesture to induce BRI cooperation from Belarus. This investment may now prove a total loss for China.

The economic hit is relatively minor when compared to the social, economic and geopolitical headache that Russia's attack on ***Ukraine*** is creating for Xi's government. China's "no limits" strategic partnership with Russia has turned into a liability for Beijing. Russian leader Vladimir Putin's willingness to cause collateral damage to the BRI - which is intimately tied to the Chinese leader's personal prestige - has inflicted reputational costs on China, costs that may hinder efforts to infuse the BRI with fresh momentum once the fighting in ***Ukraine*** stops. There also could be economic penalties for China, if Beijing provides tangible military or financial assistance to Russia.

Internally, the prospect of a prolonged interruption of BRI trade has significant ramifications for Beijing. A major strategic BRI objective is facilitating the pacification of China's restive Xinjiang Province, the scene of an ongoing crackdown on Muslim minorities. Xi has consistently presented the BRI as an instrument capable of bringing peace through trade and economic development. The specific vision for Xinjiang was laid out in China's 13th five-year plan, which pledged to "strengthen infrastructure development along major routes and at major ports of entry" and "work to develop Xinjiang as the core region for the Silk Road Economic Belt." China's strategy also emphasised greater economic integration with Central Asian states, in particular Kazakhstan, thus promoting a greater level of stability along China's western border. With many BRI rail routes hamstrung, China will be hard-pressed to come up with strategic alternatives. Beyond the short-term impacts on trade, Russia's invasion severely undermines the BRI's "peace through commerce" strategic rationale.

Central Asia's stability is fast-emerging as a source of concern for China, given that the sanctions imposed on Russia are also punishing Central Asian economies, and are causing labour migration patterns to shift. Remittances sent back home by Central Asian labour ***migrants*** have long been an important source of income for many families in the region. But this crucial income stream is now in danger of rapidly drying up.

For a variety of reasons, including fears of impressment into the Russian army, legions of Central Asian labour ***migrants*** are leaving Russia and returning to their homelands, where dismal job prospects await. The combination of rapid inflation, economic stagnation and rising unemployment in Central Asia raises the risk of regional unrest. Already in January, before the start of the war, discontent boiled over into deadly street protests in Kazakhstan. Worse could be looming just over the horizon.

Kazakhstan is the Central Asian nation with the most to lose from BRI disruption. BRI transit trade had been a bright spot in Kazakhstan's otherwise bleak economic landscape in recent years. Kazakhstan also tailored its development strategy around its role as a trade corridor. Even while the COVID pandemic was raging, trans-Eurasian rail corridors experienced growth; in 2021, the BRI network, of which Kazakhstan is a major hub, handled about 15,000 trains, ferrying almost 1.5mn containers. The massive new inland port of Khorgos, on the Kazakhstani-Chinese border, often portrayed by Kazakhstani officials as the Belt and Road's "buckle," generated a nice revenue flow into state coffers, despite rampant smuggling. Now, it seems likely there will be a sustained drop in trains passing through Khorgos.

Kazakhstani officials are clearly worried, especially given that the country has barely recovered from its severe bout of instability in January. The ripple effect of sanctions has already fuelled a 20% drop in the value of the Kazakhstani currency, the tenge. The inflation rate in February was roughly double the official estimate. The Central Bank has already spent over $800mn of its reserves to reinforce the battered currency. Authorities also have imposed limits on foreign currency and gold exports. It's uncertain whether the post-invasion spike in global energy prices can help offset the financial turbulence by providing added revenue for energy-rich Kazakhstan.

With BRI routes traversing Russia now seemingly on hold, southern routes via the Caspian Basin, avoiding Russian territory, are receiving more attention. On March 16, Xi moved to shore up diplomatic ties along the southern route, discussing trade and transit with the leaders of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and his son and heir, Serdar. While growth in transit volume along southern BRI routes is possible, alternative routings that avoid Russian territory have their own logistical complications, possibly including Russia's continuing assertion of a "sphere of influence" in the greater Caspian Basin.

War-induced destabilisation is one factor behind Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's offer to serve as a mediator to end the fighting. The offer, however, has fallen on deaf ears. It seems Vladimir Putin is in no mood to listen to anyone from outside his inner circle. Only China appears to possess sufficient heft to break through Putin's defensive bubble. But so far, its "no limits" relationship with Russia seems to be trumping BRI losses and other economic considerations in prompting China to stay on the sidelines.

Nathan Hutson is a professor at the University of North Texas. He is a specialist on China's Belt and Road Initiative and previously worked as a consultant for the World Bank.

This article originally appeared on Eurasianet here.

**Load-Date:** March 22, 2022

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**Ukrainian refugees are torn between war at home and a new life in Poland**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 22, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 835 words

**Body**

"Putin is a bastard. Lukashenka is another," says Luba, 50, as she drags a huge suitcase along the platform at the Przemysl train station on the eastern Polish border. A Polish volunteer by her side drags her other belongings.

Before the war started, Luba worked as a nurse in a kindergarten in Zhytomyr, a town of nearly 270,000 some 130 km west of the capital Kyiv. Now she is frantic over what has happened to her, her family, and the kindergarten kids she took care of.

"I have always taught kids to be kind, not evil. And now small children, their fathers and mothers are just fleeing... And do you know how many people are dying in ***Ukraine***? No one even publishes these numbers," Luba says.

Luba is one of nearly 2.2mn Ukrainian ***refugees*** who have sought safety in Poland since Russia invaded ***Ukraine*** on February 24. Thousands have arrived in Przemysl- it took Luba five days, she says, almost crying - typically via Lviv, one of the last major Ukrainian cities to have been spared destruction so far.

Life at the Przemysl station now goes in sync with trains arriving from Lviv, two and a half hours away. With every train from the Ukrainian side calling at the station, it fills up with new ***refugees***, most of them women and children.

In front of the station building there is a crowd of ***refugees***. Between them Polish and Ukrainian volunteers are trying to offer the distressed people information and, more importantly, food.

A small line has formed at a stand with SIM cards, which Polish mobile operators hand out either for free or at a discount. Police, firemen, and journalists are everywhere.

Inside, the station building is crammed. Beside the walls many ***refugees*** are sleeping, exhausted after the ordeal they had to go through to get to Poland. Some are lining up at food and water points, which seem to always run out and then be replenished, as volunteers keep delivering big boxes with lunches and water all the time.

Some ***refugees*** are standing around a table with a map of Poland on which volunteers explain, the train timetables in their hands, where and at what times trains leave from Przemysl.

Nastya Valah, 22, is desperate to get to Warsaw, where her friends live. She has just arrived from Dnipro, a town of nearly one million people, 200 kilometres south of the heavily shelled Kharkiv.

"There are a lot of ***refugees*** in our city. From Kharkiv, Kyiv, Mariupol and all over ***Ukraine***. It's slightly quieter in Dnipro, but they say something bad might begin there soon, too," Valah says. "War is scary," she says.

A fitness trainer in Dnipro, Valah says she will try to find a job in Warsaw - as long as she can find care for her son, who is just 21 months old.

"If there's someone to look after my child then yes, I am going to work. He's too small for a kindergarten for at least three more months. Otherwise, I just don't know. We came here with literally one bag. I only took a stroller from here," Valah says.

These days, Poles are leaving strollers or items like crutches or wheelchairs in case any sick or elderly ***refugees*** might need them. The biggest migration to Poland since World War Two will change Poland forever, experts say.

But for now, no one on the ground thinks about how the government should respond or that there are already political forces trying to pitch Poles against the Ukrainian ***refugees***.

Yet, these factors could soon weigh heavily on day-to-day life in a country, the population of which grew 5% in under four weeks. Konfederacja, Poland's far-right party, has recently staged a press briefing under the headline of "Help, not privileges", which argued that initiatives such as free public transit for ***refugees*** could lead to "social tension".

Poland's civil society has responded ahead of the government with a countrywide effort to help. There are countless money-raisers, tens of thousands of Poles are letting their flats to ***refugee*** families and are on the lookout for jobs for them.

Marta is a teacher of the Polish language from Lublin, the biggest Polish city near the Ukrainian border. Since early March, she has lived with a Ukrainian mother, her two-year old son and an 11-year old niece.

"I've given them the living room and the bedroom and I have moved to the smallest room. The mother is a paramedic and she would like to work as one here in Poland but it's tough without the language. I think it's going to a problem for many ***refugees***. Their kids will learn Polish naturally in school but what about their parents?" Marta says.

"For now, they're going to live with me," Marta says.

Meanwhile, Luba, who has got on her train to Poznan that is about to depart, is growing even more agitated. Her daughter, who is 27, has remained in the still relatively quiet western ***Ukraine***, in Rivne.

"She stayed in Rivne to help ***refugees*** from places like Kharkiv," Luba says.

"No one thought they would invade with tanks. Nobody wants to! But it's not us who came to another country so we have to. Putin, you bastard," she says.

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**Slovenia supports more sanctions against Russia to stop war in Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 22, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 225 words

**Body**

Slovenian Foreign Minister Anze Logar said on March 21 that more sanctions are needed against Russia over its war in ***Ukraine*** to focus on export areas not covered by the EU so far, such as the diamond trade, gold reserves and the use of cryptocurrencies.

Logar was speaking at the meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council on Russia's aggression against ***Ukraine***.

Logar said that Slovenia is providing further assistance and support to ***Ukraine*** and Ukrainian ***refugees***, including additional restrictive measures that would help put additional pressure on the Russian Federation to end the military aggression, according to the foreign ministry statement.

EU ministers exchanged views on further expansion of the restrictive measures already taken by the EU against the Russian Federation and Belarus, as well as other measures to assist ***Ukraine***, especially in the humanitarian field as well as in military and politics.

Logar also called for a European perspective for ***Ukraine*** with a concrete timeline for its EU membership, as a best response to the current security and political challenges.

At the same time, he emphasised that the Western Balkans, Moldova and Georgia must remain at the forefront of the EU enlargement policy.

"Enlargement policy processes need to be accelerated and the EU needs to respond quickly and effectively," Logar said.

**Load-Date:** March 23, 2022

**End of Document**

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**Siege of Kharkiv: "We know Ukraine will win - but will we survive?"**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 22, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 2773 words

**Body**

Russian troops have been shelling Kharkiv for 25 days. Meduza spoke to the civilians who still live there.

Russian troops have been shelling Kharkiv nonstop for over three weeks now. The city's residential areas and historic centre are completely destroyed, and necessities like food and medicines are difficult to come by. More than 100 civilians have been killed, while hundreds of thousands of others have fled the city. Meduza spoke to some of the people who remain about what life is like in Kharkiv and what's motivating them to stay.

Anna

Business owner, 53 years old

My lifestyle is completely different now. If I leave my home, I take a backpack with a change of clothes and some cans of food with me. Everyone carries their documents with them - you want to be easy to identify if you get blown up. On one hand, we knew this war was possible. At about six in the morning [on February 24], a friend called us and said: "Get up, it's started." That was it - there was no need to explain what had started. My arms and legs were shaking, trembling, everything was shaking. Then we heard that kaboom, kaboom - when you first hear it, you're certain that the next "kaboom" will be the one that hits you. We've been at war since 2014, and a lot of people have signed up to volunteer since then - it put a big strain on them when everything started in the Donbas. Back then, our army was very weak, but people didn't give up. We've basically maintained our own army. People bought underwear, socks and toothbrushes. Businesses donated.

I started trying to sign up on the first day [February 24]. I called and wrote to all of the volunteers I knew. Everyone was busy with something, so there was no good way to get involved. Just a bunch of forms: "If you want to be a volunteer, fill out this form." I filled it out five times.

A friend called me to ask: "Do you want to do some work for the Health Ministry's hotline? They need someone to sort through applications [for medicine], make calls and update the system." I said, "Sure, send over the list [of people who called the hotline to ask for help obtaining medicine]." I didn't realise the list would contain three thousand people.

People were cut off from pharmacies and doctors. Some of them (insulin-deficient or HIV-positive people) were able to get free medicine and some of them bought it in the pharmacy. But there are only a fraction of the number of pharmacies there were before, and you have to stand in line for three hours just to find out if they have what you need. The worse a district has been hit, the fewer stores and pharmacies it has. Not to mention the people who are afraid to leave their homes at all.

I've now gathered a team of six people. But that's still small - we need at least three times or so more than that. I'm now trying to figure out who's going to buy the medicine - and with what money. The [Health] Ministry is willing to finance it, but that's a government ministry, which means that for each individual person, we'd have to submit a letter - basically, it would take too long. The state is an unwieldy machine. In situations like this, people are a little faster. Though we couldn't manage without the government's help.

The Health Ministry gave me the phone number of the head of the Kharkiv State Medicine Services. I thought he would be able to help me, but he turned out to be the one who needed help. He asked me to help him purchase sanitary products for the metro. There are a lot of people down there, and they're constantly having to disinfect [becuase of] the war. He gave me the contact information for a firm that sells them at cost, I called my friend, and he paid. From what I understand, there are people who never come out of the metro.

A lot of people can't take it, psychologically. Some of them don't leave their houses. I'm scared, too, to be honest. We've tried not to leave our district, but it looks like we'll eventually have to.

Old people are really suffering. They don't want to leave, so people abandon them. Then, three days later, we start getting calls: "My mom ran out of something, help her find it, we need all of the medicine we have." So many old people. They used to get help from their neighbours, but now everyone has left. Very often, you call them and they say: "There's nobody here except me and another grandma."

Yesterday, I dealt with a woman who is 89 years old and has been lying in her apartment for three days, excuse me, but [in her own waste]. She's completely there mentally, but she's running out of strength. At the request of one of her family members, I asked someone to go check on her - he went, opened the door, looked, then called me back and said: "I'm not prepared for this right now."

Almost nobody in the city is working. The only exceptions are the people we've always complained about: the public utilities worker - they're on the front lines. We always grumbled about them: the plumbing system was too old, the communications infrastructure was too old. But now, when people are fixing things under gunfire, when the firefighters are putting out fires while bombs go off around them - it speaks for itself.

As for us, we haven't left Kharkiv. We've thought about it several times, but we haven't left. Our son, his girlfriend and her mother are all here with us. We brought our son here from the district near the airport - we decided it was too dangerous there right now. It's a lot easier if everybody sticks together. We have a three-room apartment, so there's plenty of space for everybody. Our part of the apartment is very friendly - all of the neighbours support each other.

We have a car - two, actually, but one needs repairs. It wouldn't be a difficult job, but unfortunately, the shop where we wanted to get it fixed was bombed.

We can leave, but we have four cats, and there are five of us. We have friends we can stay the night with in Lviv, but getting there wouldn't be easy: it would take at least four days. Right now, it's full of checkpoints and traffic. Meanwhile, back here, you're at home, you have a bed, internet, some measure of comfort. We had a working shower until today. The Russians hit the water supply, there's serious damage. Now the water's back, but only for a couple hours - from seven to nine pm.

But we do have a basement. And not the worst basement. At first, we were going down there several times a day, then we stopped - now we hide out in the hallway. But we spent one night in the basement, because when two airplanes got shot down over us, it was so loud that we all knew we wouldn't be sleeping that night. The guys here explained to me that if there's an airstrike, not even the basement will be safe, but who knows - maybe we'd get lucky.

In the areas that get bombed a lot, there's no light, no gas, not even heat. A person might have to walk, say, 25 minutes to get to the nearest store. Some people are scared, and some can't even make it.

The thing I'm most afraid of is realising we need to leave and no longer being able to. But we have hope, because Kharkiv is a really big city, and capturing it would require a lot of strength. And after all, someone needs to stay behind and fight, if it comes to that.

There's no huge looting problem, of course. I see much more mutual aid and support, but I'm a lucky person, I have those kinds of people around me. Wherever you look, everyone's helping others in some way. Sharing food. In our group chat with our neighbours, as soon as information appears about a water shortage, somebody writes: "Guys, I'm going to get some water right now. Everyone come down with your bottles in half an hour." That happens all the time.

Yesterday, we celebrated a holiday with our neighbours, and the men decided to barbecue, because we haven't been able to lately. Ten minutes before curfew, I decided to go out for a walk. I go down, and there's smoke everywhere: people are pouring vodka and eating meat.

Putin brought our families together. When have we ever talked to each other this much? We met our neighbours. We've gotten more exercise, because they turned the elevator off on the first day. I don't think the people on the 16th floor have gone to the basement even once.

The hardest part is not knowing when this is going to end. We've never doubted for even a minute that we're going to win. But will we be alive when it happens?

Nadezhda

Manicurist, 34 years old

Before the war, I was a manicurist. Now, my clients sometimes come to my house so I can remove their polish, because nobody has time for manicures. The city is frozen. Nothing is open except for pharmacies and grocery stores. A lot of people are volunteering, helping others, doing whatever they can. Or they just wander from store to store, looking for something they need. When I walk around the city, if I don't have anything else to do, I can find eggs in some stories, a little bit of meat in some, bread in some. I saved some longer-lasting foods during the first week [of the war], when there was still food in the supermarkets. There isn't any cereal or pasta in the stores, no flour, practically no milk. There are huge lines for humanitarian assistance, so I prefer to find groceries myself while we still have the finances. Overall, the food situation is better than it was a few weeks ago. They sometimes bring bread and chicken into the courtyard and give it out for free. All of my friends are alive. Some have gotten injured, and a lot of them evacuated. Quite a few of them left, actually. I'm still in the city, with my husband and our relatives - we have a bed-ridden grandfather and a lot of pets. The city centre, the square, part of the zoo and Gorky Park are all destroyed. The historical buildings downtown are damaged. My house and my apartment are still in one piece. When the heavy shelling starts, we hide in the basement. The bombs fall constantly, every single day, and in the last two days it's been especially bad in our district. The air-raid siren consistently goes off once every couple of hours. The bombs used to be further away, but the fighter jets would still fly [over us] and make a lot of noise.

The shelling is constant, not from the air, but from the Grads [tanks] near Kharkiv. We're very tired. Our old way of life has collapsed. I constantly want to sleep; they drop bombs all night, so we sleep in fits and starts. Some people sleep at home, like us, and some people sleep in bomb shelters or in the metro station. The mood fluctuates from "Hooray, we survived and we can keep going!" in the morning to "I don't have the strength, I don't want anything, how much can they bomb one city" in the evening. We have a curfew from 6:00 pm to 6:00 am, and mandatory blackouts - meaning we're not allowed to turn on the lights when it's dark outside. Neighbours keep track of each other to make sure nobody forgets about the lights. And we look out for suspicious people, because [Russian] saboteurs have started to penetrate the city. And they're getting caught. Sometimes you can hear machine gun fire or pistol shots outside. A lot of my male friends have joined the territorial defence force or become volunteers. But I can't talk about that, because I know Russian soldiers sometimes shoot the volunteers. My husband is currently unemployed, so sometimes he helps the local district volunteers - he's helped them unload humanitarian supplies a couple times. He doesn't have a car, and his vision is -6.5, so he's one of the last people they would recruit, but if they do, he's ready. Not everyone is fighting; some people have continued to work, for example, in residential buildings. They patch up leaks, repair the pipes, fix the substations. They often get injured by missile strikes. They repair as much of the city as they can, but it's impossible to fix everything while there's a war going on. For example, we won't have hot water in the city until the end of the war. A lot of homes don't have heat, because the pipes have been severely damaged.

We have light and heat, but the heaters aren't very warm. Right now, there's neither cold nor hot water - the plumbing got damaged somewhere yesterday. We managed to fill some bucket with water [before it was cut off]. We've learned.

Elena

30 years old, Teacher at a school for children with developmental disabilities

In 2014, I found myself in Donetsk. When the war began, I was forced to move away to Kharkiv. I didn't think anything like this could happen. On February 24, my husband and I woke up at 4:59 am, when the shelling and the explosions began. At first, I didn't believe my ears. I messaged my friend, who also left Donetsk in 2014: "Is it just me, or is this real?" She knew exactly what I meant: "No, it's not just you." We live practically on the outskirts of the city. We can see the Rogansky neighbourhood from our window - some scary things happened there [Note: A number of residential high-rises and private homes were damaged by Russian strikes in this district, resulting in deaths and injuries]. Nearby, on the first day, the 24th, a missile was shot down. Our apartment is on the eighth story - you could see the flashes from the window.

Right now, we're living in a shelter in a school. It has a basement. [The conditions], thank God, are such that we'll be able to stay here for a long time. There's a bathroom and buckets and bottles full of water, in case anything happens. We sleep on the ground with mattresses, but the room isn't damp, it's dry enough.

Right now, there are about 50 people [in the shelter], whereas before there were 170. A lot of people evacuated. Some went abroad, some went to other parts of ***Ukraine***. A lot of people had small children, old people, parents. There are people with little kids here, too. There's a girl younger than two, a boy who's about four, and some older kids and teenagers.

My husband's here and our dog is here. And the kids come up to the dog, but their parents try to distract them with things - phones, of course, paint, cartoons. For some reason, nobody here seems really depressed. Maybe not everybody's displaying their full emotions. But overall, I would even say people are feeling positive.

I have a lot of fear. I haven't got any further than the school gates yet, I'm just too scared. I don't know how much I'll need to work on myself. Everything is scary - outside, you could get caught under fire, but if you're in your apartment, the shelling starts, and there are always bombs flying somewhere. My husband has gone out, and he said the people in the city are doing all they can to make the people who haven't been able to leave feel comfortable - they're repairing everything, sorting through the ruins. Our school is a transit point for humanitarian supplies. We help sort it, then some cars come and take the groceries and medical products to those who need it in the hospital; sometimes it's the territorial defence, sometimes the military. They also bring us groceries to cook with, and then they take the meals where they need to go. The education department knows that there are employees and ***refugees*** from other parts of the city here. Enough supplies get sent to the city's businesses: the fast food plant, the meat processing facility, the poultry farm. Unfortunately, there are some [pro-Russian] minded people in Kharkiv. They hide in the shelters and eat the humanitarian aid that comes from Europe and is distributed by ***Ukraine***. And they still sympathise with Russia - it's just delusional, if you ask me. I know [these kinds of people personally], of course. They think ***Ukraine*** is bombing itself.

I'm friends with some of my relatives from Crimea on [Russian social media site] Odnoklassniki. It's my dad's sisters and their children. I wrote: "We don't need to be saved from anyone. We live on our own land and we want to live in ***Ukraine***. Please get out of here." Then came a barrage of negative comments. "It was different in the Soviet Union," "You're Nazis," "You worship Bandera." "I want to get in a tank myself and come greet you all." And those are my relatives. So we cut them off. I'm not going to talk to them anymore. I don't see the point.

My dad is currently in Crimea serving in the army; his wife and his wife's son are there with him. I messaged him, "Did they send you to `save' ***Ukraine***, too?"

"Yes," he responded.

"You don't need to save us from anybody," I wrote.

"You don't understand anything," he wrote back. "People want us to save them from the Nazis."

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**Load-Date:** March 23, 2022

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**Lithuanian minister walks out of WHO meeting after Russia asks to speak**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 22, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 162 words

**Body**

Lithuanian Health Minister Arunas Dulkys walked out of the room during the World Health Organisation meeting in Istanbul in protest after Russia requested to speak, LRT.lt, the website of the Lithuanian national broadcaster LRT, reported on March 21.

"I left the room in solidarity with ***Ukraine*** when Russia asked to speak," Dulkys told BNS, a Lithuanian news wire service, on March 18, adding that representatives of other countries did not leave the room.

According to Dulkys, the meeting agenda did not include an address by the Russian deputy health minister.

Istanbul was hosting a meeting on ***migrant*** health, organised by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, on March 16-18. However, Dulkys said, the meeting mostly focused on Russia's war in ***Ukraine***.

"The event became almost exclusively about ***Ukraine***. At least the European countries talked exclusively about ***Ukraine***," the Lithuanian health minister said.

Russia launched its invasion of ***Ukraine*** on February 24.

**Load-Date:** March 22, 2022

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**Thousands march in Bulgaria to support Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 24, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 333 words

**Body**

Tens of thousands of people marched in the Bulgarian capital Sofia on March 24 to mark one month since the start of Russian war in ***Ukraine*** and demand its end.

The march, the first since the start of the war, gathered together Bulgarians, Ukrainian ***refugees***, as well as Russians and other foreigners supporting ***Ukraine*** against Russia. According to estimations, the number of people was similar to that of the biggest protests ever held in the country.

"Praise ***Ukraine***! Praise heroes!", "Putin, Shoygu, Lavrov, welcome to the Hague", "Putin khuilo" and "Russian war ship, go f\*ck yourself!" were among the most chanted along with the Ukrainian state anthem.

"Oh, it was beautiful! We had it all and we were so many," 12-year old A. M., a ***refugee*** from Mykolaiv, said.

She was laughing for the first time since her escape from the war along with her mother and sister.

"I am proud of all Bulgarians who have come today," Elisaveta Belobradova, MP of Democratic Bulgaria, wrote on Facebook after the rally.

The gathering was organised by several individuals and not backed officially by political formations. Its organisers called on people to stand together to show Ukrainians that Bulgaria is supporting them in their war for their homeland.

The rally took place on the day when Nato decided to strengthen its Eastern flank and send more troops to Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia.

People were calling on their government to take more decisive steps to support ***Ukraine***, sending much-needed military aid. The government in Sofia is refraining from that, claiming that the risks are too high as it is too close to the war zone.

President Rumen Radev went even further, saying that ***Ukraine*** is much better armed than Bulgaria and that Sofia must make efforts to obtain more defence equipment instead of sending it to ***Ukraine***.

On the other hand, Radev expressed support for Nato's decision to send troops to Bulgaria, saying they would add to the battle group the authorities are forming.

**Load-Date:** March 25, 2022

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**EU, G7 and Nato pledge more aid and weapons to Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 24, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 373 words

**Body**

Nato and its allies have made new pledges to provide ***Ukraine*** with humanitarian aid and weapons as Europe adjusts to what Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg calls "a new security reality".

Leaders from the EU, Nato and the G7 group of developed nations all met in Brussels on March 24 for the first time in history. The leaders discussed their response to Russia's ongoing war with ***Ukraine***.

In a video address to the assembled leaders, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy called on the allies to increase sanctions on Russia and provide ***Ukraine*** with more weapons.

"You have thousands of fighter jets! But we haven't been given any yet," Zelenskiy said to the leaders of Nato. "You have at least 20,000 tanks! ***Ukraine*** asked for one percent - one percent - of your tanks to be given or sold to us. But we do not have a clear answer yet."

Zelenskiy also urged world leaders to send his army anti-missile defence systems and to impose a no-fly zone over ***Ukraine***, which Nato's leaders have ruled out.

However, the leaders did answer calls for more lethal aid to ***Ukraine*** with new pledges. Germany will send ***Ukraine*** 2,000 more anti-tank weapons, while the EU signed off $550mn more military aid to ***Ukraine*** on Wednesday, doubling its previous contribution.

Nato, meanwhile, has agreed to strengthen Ukrainian cyber-defences and help Ukrainians defend themselves against "biological, chemical, radiological and nuclear threats".

Humanitarian efforts are also being intensified. The US has agreed to take 100,000 Ukrainian ***refugees***. The White House has committed $1bn to humanitarian aid in ***Ukraine***.

Nato has also agreed to deploy more troops to Eastern European countries in response to the invasion. 40,000 troops will be sent to Nato's eastern flank, comprising four battlegroups, located in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.

Nato's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, has extended his time in the role by a year as a consequence of the crisis.

Stoltenberg said at the summit that Putin has "made a big mistake, and that is to launch a war against an independent sovereign nation." He added that Putin "has underestimated the strength of the Ukrainian people, the bravery of the Ukrainian people and their armed forces."

**Load-Date:** March 25, 2022

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**COMMENT: The economic rationale for an oil and gas embargo on Putin's regime**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 24, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 1605 words

**Body**

Stopping purchases of Russian oil and gas is likely to be the fastest way to stop Putin's war in ***Ukraine***. It is also the most economically efficient one.

We are economists and for the purposes of this article, we do not put forward moral arguments against Europe's decision to continue paying Russia for its oil and gas while Vladimir Putin uses these funds for his brutal war in ***Ukraine***. Not being German citizens, we cannot call on the German government to make choices that involve short-term costs for German voters. However, as economists doing research in political economy and international economics and experts on the Russian economy, we can confidently argue that a European embargo on Russian oil and gas is the right economic decision and the fastest way to stop Putin's ability to finance his war in Europe.

Yes, this embargo is costly. But its costs are manageable. Leading German economists estimate the cost of the German embargo in the range of 0.5 to 3% of GDP, or roughly €120-1,200 per capita, the equivalent of a moderate recession and below the economic costs of COVID. The Nobel prize winner Paul Krugman agrees that these costs are manageable. Two other studies consider a European embargo; one estimates that stopping purchases of Russian fuels would decrease Europeans' real incomes by less than 1%; the other one suggests that fully switching off Russian gas would reduce the euro area GDP by 2%. The German government has ample fiscal resources to make German consumers whole by subsidising the higher expenditures for energy from alternative sources and to offset negative effects on production and the labour market - as it did during the COVID recession. As the winter is over and there is less need for gas in heating, this is an ideal moment to substitute gas consumption and store as much natural gas as possible for the next winter. If the embargo is started now, the Western economies can adjust quickly, and finally rid themselves of the dependency on Russian fossil fuels, eliminating Europe's vulnerability to economic blackmail by Putin. The analysis by Bruegel, a Brussels-based think-tank, suggests that Europe can manage next winter without Russian gas and face only temporary disruptions from an outright ban on Russian oil and gas.

What is more important is that not imposing the embargo has much larger costs. Putin's war in ***Ukraine*** is first and foremost a human tragedy. But it is also an economic disaster for Europe.

Europe faces the worst ***refugee*** crisis since World War II; the number of ***refugees*** has already exceeded 3mn and continues to grow. The Euro area economy is projected to be in recession in the second quarter of 2022. Its post-COVID recovery is substantially slowed down: e.g. Goldman Sachs has already downgraded 2022 growth forecast from 3.9 to 2.5%. To put things in perspective, Russia accounts for only 3% of German imports, and the war in Europe disrupts production chains and processes (so far mostly) in Eastern Europe that account for a much larger share of European trade. Crucially, the return to status quo is not in the choice set. Prolonging this crisis will result in much higher economic costs. Thus ending Putin's war is not just a humanitarian, but also an economic, imperative.

Aren't existing sanctions sufficient to stop Putin? Since the war started, the West demonstrated unprecedented resolve and unity, and has indeed introduced sweeping sanctions which have crippled the Russian economy. The ruble has lost 40% of its value. The Russian stock market has ceased to exist. Russian sovereign debt is trading at 20 cents per dollar. Russia's Central Bank raised its inflation forecast for 2022 from 5.5 to 20% per year. The GDP fall is expected to be the worst one in Russia's thirty year post-Soviet history. Western companies have exited Russia en masse. Most importantly, the West has sanctioned the Russian Central Bank and its vast reserves, freezing a large portion of the 630bn-dollar war chest, one of the key pillars of the economic "fortress Russia".

However, while the sanctions have eliminated the accumulated stock of Russia's petrodollars, the flow is still coming in mightily at over €500mn per day from deliveries to the European Union.

At the current oil prices, Russia is likely to solve its fiscal and balance of payments problems. Oil and gas revenues are the backbone of the Russian budget. In 2021, at considerably lower oil prices, direct oil and gas taxes accounted for 40% of the Russian budget, with substantial indirect contributions from corporate profit tax, personal income tax and VAT. The Russian budget is balanced at $44 dollars per barrel. If oil and gas revenues keep coming in, Russia will run a fiscal surplus.

In addition to formal sanctions, Russian oil revenues have been recently disrupted by the private sector's voluntary boycott of Russian oil. It is hard to estimate the decline in the volumes of Russia's oil exports, but Russian oil is trading at an unprecedented discount of $30 per barrel.

The private sector's de facto embargo does create a major problem for Putin. But first of all, this embargo is not complete, there are still Western traders who handle Russian oil. Second, this disruption may be temporary - until Russia manages to reorient oil exports to new routes. The lack of a formal European embargo thus provides a light at the end of the tunnel for Putin. As he can hope for a medium-term resolution to his oil revenue problem, he has an incentive to continue the war.

The foreign cash Putin receives from Russian natural resources is now used, and will be used further, to continue the war in Europe. The sanctions on the financial sector, including the incomplete ban from SWIFT, provide only a partial obstacle as there are a variety of work-arounds, including never bringing foreign cash inside Russia and using it on international black and grey markets. Oil and gas revenues will be used to hire mercenaries from third countries and procure essential components for Russian military systems which are not domestically produced. Furthermore, Putin will attempt to use these revenues to wreak chaos and create division in Europe to improve his bargaining position. The sanctions and secondary sanctions that are in place to prevent this are inherently leaky, and this is why limiting the financial resources of Putin's military machine is of the essence.

It is true that Putin pays his military and policemen in rubles rather than in euros. But without the natural resource export incomes, the Russian budget will be in deficit. So Putin will either have to cut soldiers and officers' salaries or resort to printing money. Inflation is already very high, at 2% per week, and the export embargo will accelerate it considerably. The depletion of foreign currency revenues together with accelerating inflation will undermine Putin's ability to support the purchasing power of salaries of policemen, bureaucrats and propagandists who are the key pillars of his oppressive regime at home, making further foreign military aggression unviable.

Is an embargo futile, as Putin will sell gas and oil to China? A complete substitution towards China and other countries is impossible given the constraints of the transportation infrastructure and the size of the European market, which accounts for half of oil exports and three quarters of gas exports from Russia. However, more importantly, the embargo on Russia oil is the ultimate statement of resolve and unity from the West, which will make it much easier to bring China onboard - another crucial part of the containment and isolation strategy. In contrast, it would be much more difficult for the United States to impose secondary sanctions on countries trading with Russia if European allies keep importing Russian energy resources.

Indisputably, an embargo will also hurt ordinary Russians, whether they support Putin's war in ***Ukraine*** or not. In a non-democratic regime, the burden of the sanctions which target Putin and his friends will be at least partially borne by the public, as this already happened after 2014. As long as Putin is in charge, he will continue to reorient Russia's fiscal resources to benefit his friends and reinforce the loyalty of his repression and propaganda apparatus; this will of course happen at the cost of lower incomes for ordinary Russians. But this does not mean that not imposing sanctions will help them. Rebuilding the Russian economy requires stopping the war.

Putin has shown his ultimate disregard towards human life. He wants to continue this war, which is devastating for both ***Ukraine*** and Russia, with tens of thousands lives lost and the welfare of over hundred million people destroyed. On March 16, in a meeting on economic (!) issues, he literally said that he is seeking a "final solution" in ***Ukraine***. The only way to stop Putin is to deprive him of financial resources to continue this war. It is also crucial to emphasise that the embargo is in place until Russia can provide credible assurances of no further aggression in ***Ukraine*** or elsewhere.

Not implementing embargo now will prolong the war in ***Ukraine***, which already has very high economic costs for Europe. In addition, the short-term economic arguments fail to capture the possible costs from further escalation of the war which threatens to involve more countries in Europe with potentially catastrophic consequences. Thus embargo is the economic imperative which will deprive Putin of financial resources to continue the war. Any other policy option will in all likelihood be vastly more costly and dangerous.

**Load-Date:** March 24, 2022

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**Germany pledges €1bn aid for Ukraine but insists Nato will not take part in war against Russia**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 25, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 341 words

**Body**

Germany will increase its aid to ***Ukraine*** with a €1bn fund and additional weapons as Russia's invasion continues, ***Ukraine*** Business News reported on March 24. This was announced by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, who emphasised the need to increase aid to ***Ukraine***, particularly as 8mn ***refugees*** are expected to arrive in the EU over the next few weeks. "It is very important that we have been able to provide a special fund of €1bn for this budget in ***Ukraine***, a third of which is currently directed directly to humanitarian aid," Baerbock said. However, as central and eastern EU states struggle with accommodating Ukrainian ***refugees***, Baerbock noted that no one is sure how much more money will be needed.

In terms of military support, Baerbock announced Germany will deliver over 2000 grenade launchers to ***Ukraine***. Already, Germany has provided 1,000 anti-tank weapons, 500 Stinger SAMs and 500 Arrows, although it initially promised 2,700, according to ***Ukraine*** Business News. Sweden will also send weapons to ***Ukraine*** and promised another 5,000 units of anti-tank weapons as well as demining equipment. Despite the increased military support for ***Ukraine***, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has insisted that Nato will not directly take part in the war. "In 80 years, we have avoided the unthinkable, and we must stay the course! Therefore, Nato will not be a party to the war in ***Ukraine***," the German leader said. But not all Nato members agree on the appropriate response to the war in ***Ukraine***. Poland wants a controversial Nato-led peacekeeping mission to be deployed to ***Ukraine***, an idea that will be tabled during the alliance's summit in Brussels this week. Furthermore, both Estonia and Lithuania have called for a "no-fly zone" over ***Ukraine*** after intense bombings have devastated cities like Kharkiv and Mariupol. Despite over 90% of Ukrainian citizens supporting a no-fly zone, Nato and the EU have been hesitant to implement the policy out of fears of escalating the war. A peacekeeping mission will likely be met with a similar response.

**Load-Date:** March 25, 2022

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**Biden visits a Poland transformed into key Nato ally by Putin's 'war of choice'**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 25, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 635 words

**Body**

On Friday and Saturday US President Joe Biden will visit a Poland that was once sidelined on the international scene but which is now once again a key Nato ally after Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine***.

Biden will kick off his visit not in Warsaw but in the southeastern city of Rzeszów, just 70 kilometres from the Ukrainian border, to meet US troops and attend a briefing on humanitarian help to ***refugees***. On Saturday Biden will meet Polish President Andrzej Duda.

Biden's visit - his first to Poland and also the first proper meeting with Duda - will focus on "Putin's war of choice" - as the White House press services put it - and is expected to show Nato ready as ever to deter Russia from escalating the conflict. For Poland, it will also underline the country's newly gained clout in what appears to be a fast rebalancing global security and geopolitical order.

"You can see what the level of Polish-American relations is today, how Poland is an important place on the map for the United States today and how strong and strategic ties also connect us with the United States," Duda said on March 24 in Brussels after the extraordinary Nato summit.

Duda repeated the message in a televised address to Poles later on the same day, saying that "the presence of the American leader in our country in these trying days is a very important sign corroborating the strategic nature of Polish-American relations."

Bordering with Russia's Kaliningrad region, Moscow's client state Belarus, and war-torn ***Ukraine***, the 38-million strong Poland is the most important country on Nato's eastern flank.

Poland has the biggest army in the CEE region and is naturally hosting a large presence of Nato troops, a force to be strengthened now that the alliance is on high alert due to the war raging on its borders. A Russian airstrike on a Ukrainian training centre just 25 kilometres from the Polish border - where Nato trained Ukrainian troops - showed that the risk of a direct confrontation remains too close for comfort.

"Between now and the Nato summit in June, we will develop plans for additional forces and capabilities to strengthen Nato's defences," Biden said after the Nato summit concluded on March 24. Poland will almost certainly see much of that.

"We should hear from President Joe Biden about the durability of the Polish-American alliance, about the durability of the American presence in Poland, and about the durability of American guarantees for Poland," Krzysztof Szczerski, Poland's ambassador to the UN, told the state broadcaster TVP Info.

"[It will be] a clear signal that this is not only potential aid for Poland but real and lasting aid for Poland, a permanent readiness today," Szczerski added.

Biden's visit follows a trip to Warsaw by Vice President Kamala Harris two weeks ago and by Secretary of State Antony Blinken a week before that.

Poland's relations with the US had long been rather thorny under Duda and the rightwing government of Law and Justice (PiS) that he supports.

The US has criticized Poland for targeting the US-owned broadcaster TVN, which is critical of the government, as well as for Warsaw's feuds with the EU over the rule of law or discriminating against the LGBTQ+ community - tactics similar to ones used by Putin to cement his power in Russia.

But as Russia began concentrating troops along ***Ukraine***'s borders, whatever problems the US had with Poland began moving to the background, as geopolitics took over.

What Biden will not talk about in Poland is also clear. Two of Warsaw's initiatives to help ***Ukraine*** have been rebuffed by the US: an idea to send Kyiv MIG-29 fighter jets via the US military base in Ramstein, Germany, and a proposal to deploy a peacekeeping mission, possibly led by Nato, to give ***Ukraine*** on-the-ground support against Russia.

**Load-Date:** March 28, 2022

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**Biden calls Putin a butcher, but Macron urges caution**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 27, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 574 words

**Body**

US President Joe Biden called Russian President Vladimir Putin a "butcher" and said "this man cannot stay in office" during speeches he made in Warsaw over the weekend, comments that worried the US' European allies as going too far.

Whilst in a stadium to meet Ukrainian ***refugees*** from the war there, Biden was asked by reporters what seeing the Ukrainian ***refugees*** at Stadion Narodowy made him think of. Biden responded: "He's a butcher."

Biden later made a speech, closing with a comment that Vladimir Putin could not "remain in power." It was later reported that this comment was off the cuff and not part of the prepared speech.

The comments have unsettled European allies and political analysts warned that they would be used to fuel Kremlin propaganda and paranoia that the US is seeking regime-change in Russia, as it had done in so many other countries.

Macron said in comments later in the day that he didn't think it was wise to label Putin a butcher.

"I wouldn't use terms like that because I'm still in talks with President Putin," the French President said during an interview. Other political analysts warned the comment could lead to Russia breaking off diplomatic relations with the US completely.

Last week, Biden for the first time called Putin a "war criminal" and then later referred to him as a "murderous dictator, a pure thug who is waging an immoral war against the people of ***Ukraine***." He's also called the Russian invasion of ***Ukraine*** "inhumane."

The Russian Foreign Ministry reacted very strongly to Biden's "thug" comment, saying it was a major breach of diplomatic protocol.

The "he can't stay in power" comment had the White House rapidly backtracking, to try to contain speculation that the US would use the war in ***Ukraine*** to change the regime in Russia.

Author and academic Niall Ferguson said in a tweet: "As I said last week, the Biden administration has apparently decided to instrumentalise the war in ***Ukraine*** to bring about regime change in Russia, rather than trying to end the war in ***Ukraine*** as soon as possible. Biden just said it out loud. This is a highly risky strategy."

Within hours of Biden's speech the White House issued a "clarification", saying the president was "making the point that Putin cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbours or the region."

The speech was delivered to a large crowd, as Poland has been the main destination for some 2mn of the 3.5mn Ukrainians that have fled the fight and they have been greeted with a warm welcome by the Polish population.

Biden reiterated that the US "stands by ***Ukraine***" and has rapidly increased its weapons supplies to bolster ***Ukraine***'s resistance to the Russian invaders.

"In the year before the invasion, America had sent $650mn in weapons to ***Ukraine*** - and since then, we have committed to another $1.35bn," Biden said. "Thanks to the courage and bravery of the Ukrainian people, the equipment we have sent them has been used to devastating effect."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has welcomed the military aid, but has repeatedly lambasted Nato for not sending heavier and more sophisticated weapons such as fighter jets or surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).

Outside the conference fall where Biden was speaking a lone Ukrainian ***refugee*** told a crowd that "talk is not enough" and that "***Ukraine*** needs weapons, more weapons. We are not asking for Nato's help or its soldiers. We need arms to fight against Russia."

**Load-Date:** March 28, 2022

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**Biden envisions long struggle against enemies of democracy in Warsaw speech**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 28, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 872 words

**Body**

The West must remain unified for "decades to come" to stand up to the enemies of democracy, liberty, and rules-based order, US President Joe Biden said in a highly anticipated speech to conclude his visit in Poland.

Biden spent a little over 24 hours in Poland, which became a key Nato country literally overnight after Russia launched its unprovoked attack on ***Ukraine*** on February 24. For Biden, a visit to Poland - which borders Russia, its client state Belarus, and the attacked ***Ukraine***, a unique position even for any of Nato's eastern member states - was just short of a trip to the actual frontlines.

As he was about to meet Poland's President Andrzej Duda, Russia launched an airstrike on Lviv, just over 70 kilometres from the Polish border.

"We emerged anew in the great battle for freedom: a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force," Biden told several hundred guests invited to Warsaw's Royal Castle.

Thousands more, flying Polish and Ukrainian flags, watched him speak on the Castle Square nearby.

Earlier that day, Biden called Russian President Vladimir a "butcher." In his speech, he said that Putin could no longer remain in power, a phrase that the White House later said clarified to mean that Putin "cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbours or the region", rather than the US president was calling for regime change.

Biden also outlined the way forward to contain Russia in the weeks and months ahead by ending Europe's dependence on Russian fossil fuels and fighting Kremlin corruption.

"In this battle, we need to be clear-eyed.  This battle will not be won in days or months either.  We need to steel ourselves for the long fight ahead," Biden said.

In Poland, the expectations were for Biden to reiterate and reinforce Nato's support for the country of 38 million, which has just welcomed nearly 2.5mn Ukrainian war ***refugees*** in a mere four weeks. Warsaw alone has some 300,000 ***refugees***, close to 20% of its pre-war population. The Ukrainian language has now become ubiquitous on the streets.

Poland is on high alert for any military developments close to its borders. In mid-March, Russia attacked a Ukrainian military training centre just 20 kilometres from the border, raising concerns of an accidental attack on Nato territory.

"We have a sacred obligation under Article 5 to defend each and every inch of Nato territory with the full force of our collective power," Biden reiterated, a point that Poland was particularly interested in after Russia attacked its neighbour and friendly country.

"Don't even think about moving on one single inch of Nato territory," Biden said.

Apart from bearing the brunt of the unprecedented migration, Poland also serves as a hub for humanitarian and military help to ***Ukraine***. Much of that effort is going through the Rzeszow-Jasionka airport, which Biden visited in the first hours of his trip to Poland.

"Today the US president is visiting us in a very difficult situation, in an international but also regional sense, because the war is [just] abroad. So when he says that [Nato's] Article 5 is valid, [it means] that we also take responsibility for your safety," Duda later told the US-owned broadcaster TVN24 in an interview.

Duda's choice of TVN24 over the infamous state-run broadcaster TVP, which Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has turned into a Kremlin-styled propaganda outlet, was symbolic too.

Before the war, Poland would often find itself on the wrong side of Washington,  despite its proclaimed special relationship with Nato's top country. The low point involved the PiS government dragging its feet in granting TVN24 mother brand, TVN, a broadcasting license. Other flashpoints concerned PiS - and also Duda personally - attacking the LBTQ+ minority and undermining rule of law. On all those points Washington issued more or less diplomatic warnings.

Biden himself had to wait before Warsaw acknowledged his victory in the election in 2020.

"Congratulations to Joe Biden for a successful presidential campaign. As we await the nomination by the Electoral College, Poland is determined to upkeep high-level and high-quality PL-US strategic partnership for an even stronger alliance," Duda (in)famously tweeted after Biden clinched his win over Donald Trump, whom PiS had favoured for another four years in the White House.

In his speech, Biden hinted at Poland's internal struggles that had pushed it to the margins of international politics. "All of us, including here in Poland, must do the hard work of democracy each and every day," Biden said.

Biden also addressed Ukrainians, even though he focussed on humanitarian aid, while the pleas of the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to send in heavy equipment or establish a no-fly zone over the country remained unanswered.

Biden underlined the amount of other military help: $650mn worth of weaponry sent to ***Ukraine*** before the war and, since the invasion, another $1.35bn.

The US leader also pledged that the US would take in 100,000 Ukrainian ***refugees*** and offered $1.3bn in humanitarian assistance.

"We stand with you. Period," Biden said.

**Load-Date:** March 28, 2022

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**Zelenskiy gives his first interview with Russian journalists: "This is not just a war. Everything is much worse"**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 28, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 12022 words

**Body**

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy gave his first big interview with leading liberal Russian journalists since the start of the war via Zoom on March 27.

He spoke with the Latvia-based editor-in-chief of Meduza Ivan Kolpakov that has been declared a "foreign agent" by the Kremlin; the editor-in-chief of liberal opposition broadcaster Dozhd TV channel Tikhon Dzyadko that was recently closed down in Russia; well known journalist and writer Mikhail Zygar, who also asked Zelenskiy one question from Novaya Gazeta editor-in-chief who was recently awarded the Nobel peace prize Dmitry Muratov; and Kommersant special correspondent Vladimir Solovyov.

The interview was taken on zoom. Meduza publish it in Russian in its entirety and with minimal editing. It is also available on the YouTube channel of Mikhail Zygar , the YouTube channel of Tikhon Dzyadko and Ekaterina Kotrikadze and elsewhere.

The main points to come out of the interview include:

Zelenskiy spoke Russian throughout, his main language, although he turned to colleagues off camera to ask for a precise translation into Russian of the occasional Ukrainian word.

The use of the Russian language was one theme in the conversation as one of the Kremlin's demands is the restoration of Russian as an official language. Zelenskiy said that some Russians would be embarrassed now to speak Russian after the violence that Russia has brought down on ***Ukraine***.

Russian President Vladimir Putin talks about the "Russian World", the "Slavic brotherhood" and the need to defend the needs of Russian speakers, but said the Kremlin's action smacks of domination.

Zelenskiy talked about the difference between "power" (vlast) and the people (narod), which are different to the similar democratic concepts familiar in the west as they are rooted in the Soviet legacy.

Zelenskiy challenged the Russian government's claim that there is no sense of national identity in ***Ukraine***.

Zelenskiy confirmed that Russian forces now control Mariupol and that its waterways are mined. He added that attempts to send in humanitarian aid to the beleaguered defenders of the city resulted in the shooting of the truck drivers.

Attempts to evacuate Mariupol resulted with ***refugees*** being redirected to Russian territory, including 2,000 children. He claimed Russia is "stealing" children and treating the ***refugees*** as an "exchange fund."

Zelenskiy said he is in contact with the defenders in Mariupol and it was their decision to stay to defend the wounded and bury the dead. He described "piles of bodies" left in the streets of the city that include dead Russian soldiers and accused the Russian army of "doing nothing" about their dead.

Zelenskiy said that as part of the talks with the Russian peace negotiators Kyiv tried to reach a deal to bury the dead of both sides, but the Kremlin refused all requests. Zelenskiy refers to the Russian soldiers as "children" noting that many of them were born in 2003-4 and that the Russians had offered trash bags instead of body bags to remove the corpses.

Zelenskiy asked what the Russians are fighting for, saying that intercepted communications show the Russian forces are completely demoralised.

The president said that Russia is using a scorched earth strategy that reduces cities to rubble and that the images seen on social media do not capture the level of destruction. He added that the government has not shared some of the most graphic images as they are so terrible.

The war is going on just as ***Ukraine***'s planting season begins and highlights that ***Ukraine*** feeds Europe and the Arab world.

The interviewers ask how Zelenskiy and the Ukrainian people feel about Russians and if it is possible to normalise relations after the war. Zelenskiy answers that many Ukrainians considered the annexation of Crimea as a "misunderstanding" and felt that an understanding must be reached. But he went on to say this invasion is a "cultural rupture."

Zelenskiy says he is grateful for the support of Russian individuals, but is deeply disappointed with those that support the war. He says it is too easy to attribute it to propaganda.

Zelenskiy supports cultural boycotts saying that Russia uses sport to promote its prestige and those athletes have to acknowledge their role in this.

Zelenskiy rejected the idea that there is no point in Russians speaking out against the war and that if it only changes one person's mind it is worth it.

On the issue of talks, Zelenskiy says there was no real start to the talks as they were public ultimatums designed to help Russia in the information war. He complained that the Russians make a lot of "broad demands" that are designed to drag the process out. He said Kyiv is used to this from the years of negotiations over the Minsk process.

Zelenskiy claims they have found ceremonial uniforms amongst the captured Russian soldiers' kit and that Russia was planning victory parades through captured Ukrainian cities.

On the "demilitarisation" and "denazification" points, Kyiv will not even engage in a discussion on such broad and ill-defined concepts.

Below is a machine-translated version of the interview as published by Medusa.

Mikhail Zygar. Let's start with a question from Dmitry Muratov. I am reading. "Dear Mr. President. I think you know the joke that the letters V and Z, which are now widely used in Russia, stand for your initials. Is, in your opinion, excuse the bluntness, "the final solution of the Zelensky problem" one of the main goals of the attack on ***Ukraine***?"

- I heard many different thoughts about the fact that my elimination is planned ... Probably, there were several attempts - by different people.

"Meaning political elimination," voice-over.

- It doesn't matter... I understand the meaning of any word well.

I take it very calmly. Some groups of people were sent, starting with political ones... If we talk about my political elimination, it was the group of Medvedchuk, the godfather of the current Russian head. They found political formats for elimination. There was a lot of propaganda in the local elections. Weakening of local government. This was one of the main reasons after my victory in the presidential election and the victory of my party, the party - today - a mono-majority. In general, they understood that the Russian authorities were losing strong - I would say quite strong - influence on Ukrainian politics. The influence was, and quite powerful. They chose a different tactic - the tactic of winning in the regions.

Why? Because regionally what's going on? I don't know how it is with you - I don't know deeply to the end - I think you will correct me ... What did we have? For a long time, we had a majoritarian system in parliamentary elections in our localities. And on the ground [also], as a rule, there were certain groups - financial and political. Let's just say hardened politicians who influenced local law enforcement, politics, yes, everything ...

Accordingly, you can win [at the country level] and control - in the normal, democratic sense of the word, control - the central government; have the powers that the people have given you in legitimate, fair elections. But at the local level, you can't decide nothing. You can make reforms that just don't get there. You know, it's such a political colander. It seems to you that you have just arrived, you have a lot of ideas, ambitions, great energy and quite young people - I'm not talking about age now, but about a team of people with a young and bright head ... But you can't run to the regions, because everything is there it's just blocked.

So they chose this tactic. They regionally left a big impact. Not only that, we know how they go about buying franchises of other parties at the local level. There is a lot of money there and, as far as I know, the Russian Federation has always helped this political structure through one channel or another.

Then we saw the first steps. In various councils, district or regional, they came out with some kind of ultimatum things. It's me about the political elimination! Somewhere to block, somewhere to demolish representatives of the ruling party, etc., etc. <...> In general, this was their ideology, and from local councils to go further by re-elections to parliament. This happened - re-elections to parliament. They really wanted to... Even the left and the right united. And they united with all possible ones even in the middle - in order to demolish the controllability of the process.

Why? Because... We will now smoothly move on to the speculation - or to the reality - of physical elimination. Because when the situation in the country is unstable, the economy is unstable, everything collapses, chaos in the Verkhovna Rada... In general, this destabilization was needed only in order, having strong regional power control, to move to parties splitting the mono-majority. Chaos in the country's economy and political instability in ***Ukraine*** would still lead to an escalation from the Russian Federation - and to the rule of the current president of the Russian Federation. It's just that they could then occupy our country much faster. It was exactly what was planned. We are not even dealing with intelligence data from other countries, but, above all, our intelligence. First of all, our understanding of how the policy of ***Ukraine*** [in the Kremlin] is generally treated.

Unfortunately, they do not see the independence of ***Ukraine***. This is generally a tragedy of ours with you ... I don't know if it's possible to say "with you". Probably with you, yes - because there are two societies. And first of all, these are the peoples, and then the rulers. This tragedy happened - the immunity of us as an independent state. Perception of us not as an independent state, but as some kind of product, as part of some large organism, at the head of which the current president of Russia sees himself.

We do not consider ourselves an atavism. We consider ourselves an independent state with a long, deep history and morality. There is nothing to say about morality and unification ... I think that we show today [during the war] how it really is.

I will finish the thought with which we started ... Maybe for a long time - but forgive me.

This destabilization did not pass. But there was an escalation both in the plans within our country of those political groups about which I told you, and in the plans of external groups [from] the Russian Federation. I don't know what was reported up there in Russia, but they probably said that we are waiting for you here - with flowers and smiles. That the situation is very bad, the incumbent president is not supported, the incumbent [ruling] party is not supported. Can!

I am 99.9% sure of this. I just wouldn't throw words around in this situation.

Actually, that's how it was said: the ice has broken, gentlemen. And when they saw that things were going a little wrong, naturally [they came up with] a parallel way out - of course, to neutralize as much as possible those who would stabilize the situation in power. And when there is war, who can guarantee stability? Only the president - because martial law. By virtue of authority, by virtue of the current legislation of independent ***Ukraine***.

Tikhon Dzyadko. Vladimir Alexandrovich, I just wanted to ask about what is happening these days, about military operations, about the war. In recent weeks, one of the worst hot spots has been Mariupol. We know that the city is almost completely destroyed, and about the humanitarian catastrophe that the population of Mariupol is experiencing. However, who controls the city now? There are conflicting messages about this.

- Yes. There is no contradiction. Informational chaos - it is clear what caused it. The reality is this. The city is blocked by the Russian military. All entries and exits from the city of Mariupol are blocked. The port is mined. A humanitarian catastrophe inside the city is unequivocal, because it is impossible to go there with food, medicine and water. Russian military fire on humanitarian convoys. Drivers are killed. What happens to these cargoes, I cannot tell you. Many of them were taken back.

That is, this is our direction - Zaporozhye-Berdyansk, the entire Zaporozhye region - is difficult, there are 100-120 kilometers of the most difficult challenges. There are constant shellings.

<...> Some agreements were reached. Unblocking during the departure of civil transport, passenger, from Mariupol towards ***Ukraine*** took place. The forcible removal of people from Mariupol is not in our direction - in the direction, so to speak, the opposite, occupied; in the direction where Russia was exporting - this is also happening.

According to our data, more than two thousand children were taken out. Their exact location is unknown. They can be there with or without their parents. All in all, it's a disaster. I can't tell you what it actually looks like. This is scary.

They keep them as souls for the exchange fund. There are no cultural words - only emotional letters are now popping up, unfortunately. But since we are frank, and I, in principle, always try to be frank ...

There are our troops inside [Mariupol]. This is about why chaos is informational. Because inside - where they can climb - that's where they went, the Russian troops. But they did not go to some part of the city, because there are our guys who refused to go out to their calls. Moreover, the families of these guys turned to me. I talked to these guys. I talk to them - well, once every two days I definitely get in touch, I try very hard to find time for this, it is important for me. I tell them that I understand everything, guys, we will definitely return ... But if you feel that you need to be [there] - and you feel that it is so right and that you can survive, do it.

I understand what it looks like for the military. They said that... But I gave them that choice. They said, "We cannot [leave the city]. There are injured people here. We will not abandon the wounded." Moreover, they said: "We will not abandon the dead." For you to understand: in the city there are corpses lying on the roads, on the sidewalks. The corpses are just lying around - no one cleans them up - Russian soldiers and citizens of ***Ukraine***. Everyone. These are crowds... Not crowds, sorry. I can't say "heaps" about people. I can't find the correct Russian word. I just do not know.

Zygar. Piles.

- Yes. You know, it looks scary. But our military is not ready to leave even the dead military. To go out and somewhere, excuse me, I don't want to [think so] say... Bury somewhere, bury like rubbish - they are not ready. And not officers, but everyone.

So they protect the city, protect the wounded, protect the dead they want to bury. We asked them [to let] us take out the corpses. We were not allowed to take out either the corpses or the wounded, no one. I don't know if they are taking Russian soldiers in the other direction, where they took our children. This is unknown to me. The information is different, and it also has a wandering character, from the point of view of truth and justice, so I am not ready to subscribe to these words. But everything else you've heard is true.

Zygar. What concerns conflicting information, including the number of deaths. Particularly different assessments from the Russian and Ukrainian sides regarding the number of dead Russian soldiers. Why such different ratings? What happens to the bodies of Russian soldiers who died? Are they taken to their homeland, are they buried on the spot? Do you have any lists of those dead?

- Compiling lists. Our guys, I know, made lists - military guys. All those who are in captivity - all the lists are there, these data are there. I don't know if everyone is interested in them... Politicians, I think, they are not very interested, but from the point of view of their parents, of course... It's just hopeless... It's also impossible to live. You have to understand the information.

Zygar. Will you publish them or give them to someone?

- I think the Russian side has all the lists. Our military turned to them about the exchange. Just like the Russian side turned to the Ukrainian side. And in order to talk about any exchanges at all, lists are shown. We do not keep a secret who our prisoner of war is - for the most part. Therefore, the lists were transferred.

The military approached me and asked what my decision was. The proposal was the first: let's change everyone for everyone. It is not necessary to act by some generally accepted canons - they say, we will wait until the end of the war, or we still need to recruit [prisoners]. I don't understand why. I believe that there is an agreement to change everyone for everyone. There are so many there today - let's change them for so many. It does not matter. Do not measure 10 by 10, 11 by 11. Oh, wait, we're still picking up. This is what they are doing now with civilians ... Just some kind of disgusting.

I said: if they steal children, we will do everything, of course... It will all end with no negotiations, nothing will happen. We go from everywhere. We will not agree on anything with them. We won't finish anything and we won't change anyone.

I saw this bestiality in the Minsk process. I called it bestiality [still] then. We agreed with Putin in 2019 that we would exchange everyone for everyone) in the next two months. We had a meeting in December. We had a wonderful exchange - about 110, in my opinion, people. There was still a list from their side - they still could not give who their people were in our prisons. And so on and so forth. We handed over our lists, gave a copy to the OSCE; I gave copies of everything, because there were also questions about the Crimean guys. Passed it on just in case. We handed over the lists to the Turks, Germans, French, Russians. They handed it over to everyone - and especially the OSCE. So that there are no questions later. Everything is over. They didn't change anyone for us, none of all for all worked then.

Here you go. Therefore, now with exchanges, this is the story.

Information on the exchange fund... We have nothing to hide. I don't know how public she is, I honestly haven't asked this question yet. <...> But God knows if they need it. I'm just not sure they need those lists [at all]. Because as soon as some of these guys [that is, Russian soldiers] appear [in public], they are just children there... Especially these ones - 2003-2004... I'm actually surprised... Some of us have some periods in life ended in 2003-2004. There are people of this year of birth.

That's why I think they don't want to show what happened to the corpses. <...> We want to pass them on, we want to give them back. We don't want to keep corpses, you understand that very well. We want them to leave. At first they refused, then there was something else. Then some bags were offered to us. Listen, well, it all looks, well ... I don't even know ... You know, we all probably had something in our lives when people left - not even close people, not relatives ... Listen, even when a dog or cat dies , they don't do that. It's basically like... They're garbage bags.

I don't understand, honestly, what people think. And especially - what do the parents of these children think. I do not understand. I would just... I would set fire to everything I could. Here I would have some deputy living next to me ... And I'm telling you absolutely frankly. In principle, I was such a person even before the presidency. We would have people stuffed in the face of such a head of the district or something - if they brought something in a bag or did not want to take it. Or hidden. <...>

I am telling you this as the president of a country that is at war with Russian soldiers who have come here, and we hate them, what they are doing. But I... Look... Well, hate... This is war. But it's not cattle! It's not cattle, and therefore it's all me very much of course ...

Why is it all scary? I will tell you. It's scary because when you treat your own people like that, what kind of attitude towards everyone else? And we are definitely not our own for the Russian government. This is scary.

I think this is savagery. And all this will end badly. For ***Ukraine***, we understand in the name of what, and what you have...

I don't want to offend you. Forgive me if I say "you". I just don't know how else to say it. I speak as it is. What is happening in your country, in Russia, is an incomprehensible story for me. Tragedy. Yes, tragedy. And which affects us. That's why I said so.

And a lot of very children. I don't know... They gave an oath there or there promises... There are many children who didn't know where they were going, but, of course, many speak nonsense and lie at first out of fear, not knowing what will happen to them. And then, when they see that they are treated as normal as possible, because there is war, and it happens in different ways, many are shocked.

And all these [their] phone calls to parents and so on: pick us up. And how they abandon the tanks... [We have] a huge number of interceptions [of telephone conversations of Russian soldiers]. Just a huge number of calls when they say: "So and so. I shot myself in the leg today, and Pasha broke [something else]."

Well, look. There is a column of 200 tanks. Ours blew up 30. Everything. Consider there are no columns. 70 tanks are running. They are not warriors. They were forced. Sent to be killed. Here's how to eat.

But, unfortunately, let's get back to what the consequences and results are for us. And as a result: there is no Mariupol. Simply no. There is simply no wave. Cities near Kiev in the Kiev region - our small towns ... Which, I think, are the same as yours ... All cities near capital cities are, as a rule, small towns. But everyone lives there, country cottages, and also the local population too. It doesn't exist. Scorched earth. Just scorched earth. Absolutely.

It looks... I think you've seen the pictures, but you haven't seen everything. We can't even show it all. It is impossible to show it, because it is impossible even for our population to show what it looks like. There are just no houses. There is simply nothing in Volnovakha - no streets, no houses. There is nothing.

Mariupol is due to the fact that it is a big city... There are half a million people there. Can you imagine, a city of half a million people, 90% of the buildings are affected. They are not here. They are burned, they are gone. But at least there are high-rise buildings. And you can imagine what happened here. And in cities like Volnovakha, there is simply nothing. Absolutely. Here is the attitude. That is, they go and burn out, just burn out. I don't even know who the Russian army has ever treated like this. Never. I did not see. Maybe I was then a very young man - and [during] the war in Chechnya, I don't remember all the shots so deeply. It was scary there, but there, I'm sorry ... It's just that these volumes cannot be compared. To date, there have been two wars.

Little of. I will tell you that it is impossible to compare the volume of what happened in eight years [of the conflict in Donbass] and in four weeks. It's impossible to compare. And what we were told is that in the Donbass from our side... Or, there, in the temporarily occupied territories... This is nothing for you to understand, compared to what is happening here now. Just nothing.

Just for some reason, six rockets flew to Lvov yesterday. Six cruise missiles! Well, for some reason. They were looking for something paramilitary there ... What did they do? They hit there at various oil depots, oil depots. They perfectly understand that now the sowing season. What does this have to do... Even if they were about some kind of militarized stories and actions... What does it have to do with the sowing campaign? ***Ukraine*** feeds part of Europe, half of the Arab world. You are on good terms with the Arabs - the Russian Federation itself. Neither the Turks, nor anyone has sunflower oil, grain, nothing. Moreover, one cannot even say why this is true. They did not allow to take out the goods with grain. For these countries they were not allowed to take out.

Ivan Kolpakov. Mr. President, how has your personal attitude towards Russians changed since February 24, 2022? Do you still have people in Russia whose opinion is still important to you? And the hardest question. Do you think that Ukrainians and Russians will ever be able to normalize relations?

- First. Despite the fact that I am the president and should be a fairly pragmatic person, the attitude after the 24th has deteriorated. It got worse a lot. The emotional component [of the relationship] to the Russian Federation, to the people, has been lost. Even to the people. Even though I understand intellectually that [in Russia] there are a lot of people who support ***Ukraine***. I am grateful to them, because without word of mouth, without the work of honest journalism, without the inner potential of a Russian person who is for justice and for ***Ukraine*** ... And yes, let him be, first of all, for himself - which means that he will be for ***Ukraine*** in this situation. Because a war on our territory will not bring anything good to this Russian person, if he is aware of it. Attitudes deteriorated among the entire population.

There is irreversibility. I'll tell you, and you'll probably understand now. In 2014, when it all began, shall we say, the Russian-speaking regions of ***Ukraine*** - or Russian-speaking families, if you will - were hopeful that this would now be over. Now it will end. A lot of things happened, misunderstandings, and for many years it grew, and so on ... Some of these families - they believed that everything was still possible ... Something was somehow possible. That's exactly what I'm telling you. So here it is: something like that. Without specifics - because the war. And there was an exact understanding that something was needed somehow.

When I went to the presidency, I understood that everything needed to be done to stop the war - and that propaganda had to be fought. By your example, you need to show what you want to change: change the country, change relations with neighbors, return everything, so to speak ... In a sense, even return everything back. In some ways, until 2014. Find understanding. Sit down at the negotiating table.

Today, this month, there has been a global, historical, cultural split. Global. This is not just a war. I think this is much worse.

Some people [with whom I maintain relations] remained in Russia. First, we are talking to you. And secondly, there are people who have left Russia. It's not that I support the departure - this is their internal decision, which has been made. There are people of culture, people of art, with whom one can find certain arguments. Let's just say they find it. They are the reading percentage of the nation who will figure it out. But the deep disappointment [is] that a high level of population supports Russia for various reasons. I don't even want to say that this is informational [war], brainwashing. Look, this is, on the one hand, yes. On the other hand, propaganda is also an excuse.

Let's be honest, that's just an excuse. It's impossible not to notice a total war for so many years, right? You could say a week. We were told one thing, something else happened. Do you understand? It's not even 9/11 in the States, you know? The tragedy that everyone saw! Well no. And not the explosions of houses in Moscow, which you remember, and so on. It's not like that. It's not just one step. It's eight years, damn it! It's a long time. In eight years, people begin to complete their schooling; you can grow up, get educated, learn a subject, become a professional in any form.

I would just go to journalism, go to investigators. I would find it myself, I would dig - if I really want to understand what to do with it. But if I don't want to, then I don't want to. It is easier for me to maintain the current regime. And I think that this is the most terrible disappointment that happened. Disappointment turned into hatred of peoples.

I don't have an answer on how to get it back. I don't have an answer if it will ever come back. I am not a prophet. And it will be decided by those people who ...

Look, I'll tell you this: a few more months, and everyone in the family will have a loss - this or that. Kicked out, wounded, something happened to a child, a person moved, went to Poland, went to Bulgaria, went to another [country], did not find a job or found a job, it does not matter. Never mind. Scared. The child began to stutter because of the explosions, God knows. Everyone will have some kind of grief in the family. Some grief. Certainly not World War II. Of course, not the years of occupation. We [really] haven't finished yet, so... But the technologies are different.

But the occupation is also tougher, because it's more intense, you understand? Because the occupation is taking place... I don't even want to compare it with fascism. I don't want to compare. We understand that occupations are different... You are profound, educated people, you know how things happened in different years, in different [historical] periods of occupation, one way or another. It was unprofitable to wipe cities off the face of the earth, because when you occupy, it is necessary that someone live and work there. You will be washed your panties there, you, a military man, a soldier. You're standing there - who should do it? Wash, clean, cook, eat, live somewhere. Movie theaters worked in France and so forth, you know? It's not like that here. Generally not so. Here they come in: if the local government or someone does not want, the local government was removed; people start shouting something there - everything is burned out.

Zygar. Vladimir Alexandrovich, I would like a short clarification - literally at the level of yes or no. Do you support the boycott of Russia, Russian artists, musicians, athletes? Because we all heard recently about what happened with Sergei Loznitsa, who opposed the boycott and was expelled from the Ukrainian film academy. Do you think it is necessary to boycott everyone?

- I think that it is wrong to boycott, for example, Loznitsa. I think that Loznitsa is an artist, and he has... What I heard... I may not know everything, right? I don't even know the reason why an organization somewhere out there expelled [him]. I think there must have been some kind of mistake. Do not know. I'm definitely not deep [understand] the issue. But he is an artist who has a pro-Ukrainian position. What I heard. The position is fair.

Pro-Ukrainian - this does not mean that you convey your position in the Ukrainian language. You understand, we do not have such a thing at all. This is some kind of information bubble in which citizens live. I mean the citizens of Russia. They are told about some language there. I calmly speak to you [in Russian]. And when someone speaks Russian to me in ***Ukraine***, I switch to Russian. I am the president. I think that the president... That's how he behaves, so you can understand... If the people support him, it means that the people support this, they take it calmly.

But hatred for everything Russian will definitely grow. I will say this, sorry, instead of yes or no, a little longer, because sometimes thoughts are taken aside, such a day today is a little broken. Didn't sleep well.

I answered you about Loznitsa, I wanted to say something else about the language. Worst of all, the Russian language was done by Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. I consider irreparable damage. Of course, people outside of Russia will sometimes be embarrassed to speak Russian in some societies. So it will be. This happened after a particular war, the result of which was recognized as a specific aggressor in the world. That's all. Therefore, he definitely did the irreparable of this. For many years for sure.

These cities, as I told you, are Russian-speaking - even if you saw some kind of [connecting] thread, then you understand that it is these cities that have been wiped off the face of the earth. And these are the families. Exactly. They ran twice. Look, in 2014, when it all started, the country was transporting to Mariupol - Donetsk State University and so on. Higher educational institutions, educational colleges were transported, schools were transported, sports clubs were transported, people moved. Where? People believed, as I told you, that it was about to end, and we would return. People were in different cities close to those temporarily occupied. Imagine that they have "Grad" at their door... They are blocked there [in Mariupol], there is no way out.

So tell me, how can one relate to history associated with Russian culture or, in principle, with Russians? This is a very difficult question. So I'm afraid it won't last long.

But about the athletes. You said boycott or not, right? Look, I believe that you cannot feel this pain that we [felt] - but you should at least know. At least know and feel at least some discomfort. Then you can understand that you are not like everyone else. And your government took you without a fight. And therefore, the international boycott of certain Russian athletes who have nothing to do with politics is the right decision. Because, unfortunately, they are related. They may not even feel it to the end, right? But they must understand this, that they are an instrument of the country's international image.

And if isolation occurs - cultural, sports, this or that isolation, then ... Those who remain there. Of course, not those citizens who left - cultural figures, directors, journalists, athletes. They left, went to another country to live, and so on. And, of course, it is their right. It is their right, let them live, work, develop and so on. They, they... It's their right. But to say that they are all innocent to the end is also dishonest, because if a person has his voice nowhere ... At least once, at least one post on social networks, at least once went to the square ... Don't set fire to someone's car, don't you have to shoot at no one, you don't have to force them... Now, if you didn't kill your own king there, then you're not our friend. No, no! Well, just support. Just to say... Just to say that I can't do that, I don't want to do that. Even if one person heard me

Therefore, the boycott is precisely in order to understand that when people die there, you should at least feel uncomfortable.

Vladimir Solovyov. Mr. President, from a humanitarian, very important component, I would like to move on to an equally important one, to a diplomatic one, because the negotiations are underway, they started quite quickly, but we learn about significant progress, for example, from the statement of Turkish President Erdogan. Who said, firstly, that six points are being discussed at these Russian-Ukrainian negotiations. And secondly, that there is already progress on four. These are points that relate to ***Ukraine***'s non-entry into NATO, demilitarization, security guarantees and protection of the Russian language. But there is no progress yet on the status of Donbass and the status of Crimea. Can you explain where something really moves? And then explain, if you will, your idea of ​​a referendum. Because it's not very clear

First. As for the items. Why is the rhetoric built on six points? Because, first of all, it was an ultimatum, and the first paper was an ultimatum from the Russian Federation... It was... I wouldn't even call it a paper ultimatum - it was a public ultimatum, because, as usual, it merged somewhere in the information field. In general, there were these points that you mentioned. Pretty much the same points. True, there were also the phrases "demilitarization, denazification", a lot of things are connected with "e". Here... And we are nothing but an injection to revive the information field a little, that Russia is [supposedly] doing something and setting the agenda - we see nothing but this in this.

More about the information field... We got used to it during the Minsk talks... They always sent this or that format and, as it were, dragged out the process. This suggests that they dragged out the process, because they wanted to occupy us in a short time ...

Do you know, yes, that we found the dress uniform of the military? I don't know if you know this or not, but it's very funny how they prepared. Funny if it wasn't so tragic, yes. Parade on Independence Square [in Kyiv]. In general, here - to pass with tanks on the third or fourth day [of the war]. And so...

Therefore, it means that these are injections. Turkey's reaction is somewhat incorrect, and we talked about this with President Erdogan. There are subtleties in the translation of his statement, and subtleties in rhetoric.

"Denazification and demilitarization" - we do not discuss this at all. I said that our group... We won't sit at the table at all if we talk about some kind of "demilitarization", some kind of "denazification". For me, these are absolutely incomprehensible things.

Dzyadko. That is, it is not discussed in the negotiations?

We don't discuss at all. They asked... the Russian side at the first meeting in Belarus... To which I agreed for our group to go, because I have been saying for a long time that [the parties] need to talk - even before the war. I am not against these conversations, as long as there is a result... The Russian side feels a victory that this meeting took place, that it adds some subjectivity to Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko... Yes, for God's sake. If we can end the war, and Alexander Grigoryevich will feel from this that he is the master in the house again - yes, for God's sake. To be honest, I don't care. This is generally the choice of Belarusians, and definitely not ours. Therefore, I agreed if they had a substantive meeting.

The meeting worked out. I wouldn't call it subjective. Our parties said that there can be no phrases about "demilitarization" and "denazification", we are not interested in these points at all.

As for the [third] point of protecting the Russian language... I don't know if they conveyed all my arguments... Every next day of the war calls into question the general understanding of what the Russian language is. That is, people will not want it. People will not want to read, watch movies, talk. Well, I'm just telling you how it is... What causes it, see? Even something that someone might really like - but when there is a lot of it, then it goes back. It was also passed on to us through blood - love for the Russian language.

Here. So this is a very serious moment. So, this is about the Russian language. My opinion was the following: I wanted to cut off this permanent argument about what - how, what, what language ... We all speak as they want, in any language. We have more than 100 nationalities living in the country. So we said that only mirror respect. An agreement on mirror respect for history, languages, cultural values ​​with all neighbors. This I accept. This I accept. I am sure that our people will accept this if they want, because they will still vote in one way or another by popular elections.

So what does that mean? Stop playing - just like the Hungarians play with it a little, but less, and Russia more. Stop playing some school closures in ***Ukraine***. If you want a Russian school, someone wants to study in Russian, open a private one, please, but with the condition: you open it with us, we open it with you. We publish something here, which means we publish it here. What attitude do we want to the Russian language? This is your language, the state language of the Russian Federation, everything must be fair. Respect us and our state language Ukrainian, and that's it.

It is not necessary to say that this is the language of illiterate people. I am ready to argue with those who say this, to talk to any, in principle, Russian politician. Talk about the amount of literature read and so on. Personally. Tete-a-tete. Communicate - and in Russian. And talk to him in Ukrainian as well.

Solovyov. Now, I beg your pardon, you just brushed off the table at least three points, as far as I understand, from those that were voiced - that they are being negotiated. Demilitarization is not discussed; denazification, whatever that means, is out of the question. The Russian language is not being discussed... What then is being discussed there?

- The Russian language is being discussed, as I told you. Respect for the languages ​​of neighboring peoples - I am interested in such an agreement, I want to sign it with all neighboring countries. I am interested in Russia, Hungary, Poland - we have many different historical issues. Romania and so on... We have many different issues, we have many minorities, nationalities, and this agreement will be sufficient to respect certain languages ​​within our country. The issue of language, I am sure, will go off the agenda, because it will be resolved by such an agreement.

The fourth story is guarantees of security and neutrality, the non-nuclear status of our state. We are ready to go for it. This is the most important point. This was the first point of principle for the Russian Federation, as far as I remember. And as far as I remember, they started a war because of this. It is now that they began to add points to ultimatums - and [at first] they said that NATO was expanding. And so that there is no bloc - so that, in fact, there is no bloc in the constitution of ***Ukraine***. And then they decided to go somewhere... "We do not agree where you are going, and this is outside our agreements with the West, which are already so many years old. Therefore, this is the main issue, and because of this we are protecting our security," the Russian Federation said. Therefore, this point is a point of security guarantees for ***Ukraine***. And since they say it's for them [security guarantees], it is clear to me, and it is being discussed. It is deeply worked out, but I am interested that it should not be another piece of paper a la the Budapest Memorandum and so on.

Therefore, we are interested in this paper turning into a serious agreement that will be signed... I will now move on to the referendum. Which will be signed where the points of security guarantees are, by all the guarantors of this security. It must be ratified by the parliaments of the guarantor countries, these are two. And there must be a referendum in ***Ukraine***. Why? Because we have a law on referendums. We accepted it. Changes of this or that status... And security guarantees require constitutional changes. Do you understand? constitutional changes. These are two sessions.

When our guys met with the Russian group, they were not deep in the material at all. I'll tell you - this is, to put it mildly, shallow. What is two sessions? Otherwise, the constitution cannot be changed. Two sessions is a year. Can you imagine how long this could all be? I'm not talking about a referendum, I'm talking about constitutional changes in general. A referendum is a step faster than changing the constitution. That's what I'm talking about. The Russian side needs guarantees that this will happen. Therefore, a referendum - because only the people can decide that there will be such a status and such guarantors. The referendum will take place within a few months, and changes in the constitution will take place for at least a year in accordance with the current legislation. At least a year.

Zygar. Excuse me, but will the ***refugees*** who left ***Ukraine*** also participate in the referendum?

- Certainly. We have polling stations abroad - it all works, and it was all in the elections, in the presidential and parliamentary elections - everything works everywhere. I don't see any problem with this. But until that moment, our people... <...> We now have 90% of the population wanting to return on the first day of the end of the shots, because most of the men didn't leave anywhere at all. The women and children left. Of course everyone wants to [inaudible]. Therefore, we must have an agreement with President Putin. Guarantors will not sign anything if we have troops. Why do I think that the war can be quickly ended - and only Putin and his entourage are pulling ...

Because... Johnson, Biden, Duda, Erdogan? Who will sit down to talk about something if there are troops? Who will sign something? Nothing will happen, it's impossible. Therefore, there is no need to wait for changes in the law. Therefore, when the Russian side [says] let's first change the law, and then withdraw the tanks... Not deeply understanding the political processes from the point of view of the law. Therefore, we must come to an agreement with the President of the Russian Federation, and in order to reach an agreement, he needs to go out with his own feet from where he is there and come to meet me anywhere in the world, except ... I consider the meeting in Belarus, in Russia, in ***Ukraine***, pointless, and the meetings of our delegations emphasize this once again. They are more politically irrelevant. These are the three conflicting parties today, one way or another.

Therefore: here we met, we agreed with him, this is enough - our agreement with him with signatures, with seals, even with blood. This is enough to start the withdrawal process. The troops must be withdrawn, the guarantors will sign everything, and that's it. This will continue to work. Further ratification in parliament, a referendum for several months, and then changes in the constitution.

Solovyov. But the referendum implies not only the answer "yes", but also "no". If at the referendum the people of ***Ukraine*** say "we don't want to change the status, we don't want a neutral status", then how would everyone?..

- A referendum is impossible when there is the presence of troops. No one will ever, from the point of view of the convention, count the results of a referendum if there are troops or armed illegal formations or lawful formations of another state on the territory of the country without any legal foundation. It's impossible. This is what happened in the Crimea. What is this referendum? It can only be known to whom?.. Let's hold a referendum, and then no one will recognize it. Why? Because there were troops. This is an illegitimate process. <...>

It is necessary that the Russian side start bringing in lawyers. At least people who have a legal education, and not just military ones.

And so the question of Donbass, you also asked ... Therefore, security guarantees, that is, a neutral status, therefore mutual respect, where the issue of languages ​​\u200b\u200bis raised ... Not only languages ​​- cultures, traditions, they also raise the issue of respect for gypsies there, although we should not get into this as a state... The issues of Donbass and Crimea must be discussed and resolved, of course, so I didn't brush off all the points.

Kolpakov. Allow me one more question about negotiations. The other day, the Wall Street Journal wrote that you allegedly asked President Biden not to impose sanctions on Russian businessman Roman Abramovich. At the same time, in parallel, our various sources say that some kind of contacts are being made between ***Ukraine*** and Russia, allegedly people close to Russian President Boris Yeltsin are participating in the negotiations; allegedly from the side of ***Ukraine***, various cultural figures are participating in the negotiations. I heard in this context the name of Alexander Rodnyansky, the director. Please tell me, are there any parallel talks, are there any other contacts besides the talks that we have just talked about?

- Let me tell you this. First, a huge number of different contacts. You just have to understand. And everything that you are talking about, to some extent, has the right to life - and is already acting. I'm not sure if these are some kind of official negotiations, because as soon as the war started, [there were] many people who wanted to help somehow.

You are talking about Alexander Efimovich Rodnyansky... I know he has contacts with our guys. And other cultural figures. And just as sanctions began to be introduced... So you name one big businessman from the Russian Federation - or now they live in other countries. I will tell you that all these people, being afraid of sanctions... I am sure that there is no great patriotism in this. I'm not sure - let's just say I think so. The comfort in which they were, and which they will leave or have already left, is understandable, and there will not be much clearance ahead. Of course, they are all looking for a way out.

But I will tell you that all these years, both the Ukrainian and Russian sides, especially business, journalism, and cultural figures, have always been looking for one way or another. Getting through to the Russian government was unrealistic. Someone is up there doing something.

From the point of view of my discussion with Biden... For various reasons, I am not ready to discuss some of our private conversations now... I know that this businessman, he was in a subgroup from the Russian side. I don't know how he was, officially or unofficially, they were in contact... And, as far as I know, he really helped in a humanitarian issue with the removal of people and a humanitarian convoy from Mariupol. Everyone in Mariupol tried, and he in particular, too, I know, but nothing came of it. As I said, the gumconvoys were shot.

But the fact that from him and some other businessmen came signals "let's help somehow, let's do something" ... Some even treated what they were ready ... They were even ready to help, to restore ***Ukraine*** after the war. "We are ready to give money, we are ready to transport business to ***Ukraine***, we now live in England or Switzerland, we want... Is it possible to do this so that by some kind of sanctions list..." We all received them. But we began to receive them even when our internal sanctions were in effect, and not just Western sanctions. Some people do not want to give their names, but say that "we generally want to help your army, also being citizens of the Russian Federation." I think that...

Kolpakov. Is your office coordinating these negotiations? Do they somehow flock to you, or what?

"Look, I'm getting signals, but I wouldn't say our office is coordinating. I wouldn't say so. They come from everywhere, these signals are either from communities of one kind or another, Jewish, Muslim, and so on. Some signals are coming along the line of churches. And signals come to our office. The guys met, our negotiating group in Belarus - there are from them there ... This is a lot, so my attitude is quite simple. Any person who is ready today... Any Russian businessman, no matter what caliber, who is ready to give money to support the Ukrainian army... We are ready to provide him with security, provide work, develop his business. All those who support us today, those who fight for their country...

Kolpakov. Is exemption from sanctions being discussed for such individuals?

"I can discuss what I, as the guarantor of the constitution, am capable of doing, able and able to do. I'm talking specifically about sanctions within our state - they can be discussed. We can say that this person is changing citizenship, whoever wants to have an economic residence permit, his own vision, develop a business - you can discuss all this. But if he, she, they are ready to help today ... It is not necessary to do this publicly, I understand that a person is afraid of what will happen to his family and so on ... For such people - I don't care what nationality a person is, it's important who he is inside. That's all.

Dzyadko. I would like to ask a few more questions about other negotiations. Yesterday there was a meeting in Warsaw between the ministers of defense and foreign affairs of ***Ukraine*** with Mr. Biden, the President of the United States. Two questions. First, are there any concrete results of these negotiations, apart from political support? First of all, we are talking about the supply of weapons. And the second question: the President of Poland, Mr. Duda, spoke in favor of bringing NATO peacekeepers into the territory of ***Ukraine***. Washington, as far as we understand, is against any kind of its military presence on the ground, as they say, on the territory of ***Ukraine***. Is Biden's position on NATO peacekeepers in ***Ukraine*** known, how realistic do you think it is?

- I am unequivocal about this issue. I suggested, from the very beginning, understanding the risks... [When] the invasion had just begun, when there were risks associated with our nuclear power plants, with other enterprises that are of strategic importance, we proposed in one form or another to invite the presence of certain peacekeeping forces there . But we didn't expect it. As long as it is.

This is the whole idea of​​Poland - to send peacekeeping forces to ***Ukraine***. I don't fully understand this proposal yet. We do not need a frozen conflict on the territory of our state, I explained this at our meeting with our Polish colleagues. I know they continued this rhetoric. Fortunately, or unfortunately, this is still our country, and I am the president, so for now we will decide whether there will be certain forces here.

As for the meeting of the ministers of defense and ministers of foreign affairs with Secretary of State Blinken, of course, the number one issue was on armaments. Details are not ready to speak. We insistently explained our position. The question is clear enough. You know the question about the conflict in the sky, I talk about it publicly and openly. It depends on the decision of these two countries, and therefore there was a meeting with the United States in Poland. This issue was resolved. I am not ready to tell you the answer, as I have already told you a little higher ...

Solovyov . Mr. President, I would like to ask you to comment on the documents released by the Russian Ministry of Defense, dated January 22, signed by Nikolai Balan, according to which, as the Russian side stated, from which it follows that the armed forces of ***Ukraine*** were planning a preemptive strike, they were planning to attack Donbass first. Please explain what these documents are...

- Well, it's some kind of fake document. Did not have. Of course, there were no plans. Starting from 2019, again, to President Putin, and then through all these different channels that you spoke about today... I said that we are not going to take our territories by military means. I want to agree with you. Not only that, I want to find a format in which [you can] live for a while. I wanted to live for a while in relations between ***Ukraine*** and Russia - before this invasion. I've been looking for different options. Believe me.

Now, if you tell me the country now, did I have negotiations with them, did I prepare papers for the Russian Federation... President of the Russian Federation. Despite [what] someone there told me that it was humiliating, you can't talk about this meeting all the time. It was not humiliating for me, because I knew how it would all end. And we have come to this.

And I want about this fake. As for Balan...

Solovyov. These documents don't exist?

- I don't know what this document is. It's hard for me to say at all. If I had seen him, I would have answered you. The fakeness of all documents that talk about the attack [of ***Ukraine***] on the Donbass is 100%. In general, this is the National Guard, right? Former head of the National Guard? Mykola Balan? This can't happen in real life. To force the way to the Donbass. He doesn't even have the authority to do so. The National Guard, which, you understand, is part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. So, there must be a signature of the Minister of the Interior. What does the Minister of the Interior have to do with offensive positions? Generally nonsense. This time.

Second. Recently there was another document, I have already seen this one. He was shown just as you said at the beginning - Solovyov, but not the same. So that one, and not this one, showed a document containing my order to seize Crimea. I don't know, did you see this order? Did not see? Well, it's shown on TV everywhere.

Zygar. There, it was also proposed to give orders for the capture of the Crimea.

- Yes. I want you to pay attention to one thing. I am, of course, Vladimir Alexandrovich, but it is written in Ukrainian. But, pay attention, everywhere my signature is "V.A. Zelensky. Well, just "A" does not exist. With all due respect. Everything is in Ukrainian there, [and in Ukrainian] I am "VO". Like Ukrainian mine [if in Ukrainian]. There is no VA! These things are many. And that's how this document Balan. Etc.

Zygar. I would like to clarify the story about the Russian warship. We all remember that the first days of the war were a very powerful story. You posthumously, it seems, awarded the Ukrainian military, who were on Zeminy Island. And then there was information that they all survived. Tell me what really happened? Are they alive or not?

- A part is dead. Some were taken prisoner. All those who were taken prisoner were changed - there was an exchange for prisoners of the Russian Federation. Russia came out with this proposal. We exchanged them without hesitation. That's all. Those who died, they are, frankly, heroes. And those who survived - the guys, we exchanged, and that's it.

Dzyadko. Please check another point that is being actively raised by Russian officials. And Russian TV presenters. And the Daily Mail wrote about the same. What concerns biolaboratories. What is now in the rhetoric of the Russian authorities.

- Yes, it's a joke. There is nothing for me to explain here. Well, we don't. Well, we'd love to. We do not have. There are no nuclear weapons, no chemical biolaboratories and no chemical weapons. This doesn't exist. If there was a person like me, in those days when our country signed the surrender of our interests, I don't call it differently ... I wouldn't give it all away like that.

Just as if I would not give this story away - here is the fleet for you, live and distribute Russian passports in the Crimea, and so on. It was necessary to act honestly right away, to say that we have a lot of Russians here. We have a lot of our sailors living here in Sevastopol, despite the fact that this is your independent land, let's make a decision that both Ukrainians and Russians will be here and will act honestly. Instead of quietly sailing, handing out ... And this fleet, which was bought by their Russian officials, and so on. And the Ukrainian authorities turned a blind eye to this, absolutely.

This is the theft of territory by Russia, and an absolute betrayal by ***Ukraine***. This is what it was like in those 1990s in relation to Crimea and in relation to its independent territory. Therefore, as with these laboratories... <...> You were all here! How could we even poison someone with some kind of bullshit? Yes, we have never done this to our enemies!

The philosophy of nuclear disarmament is correct, correct, and so on. After all, you can't build your empire for the weaknesses of some. It's just not possible. Because empires are built on economics, not on intimidation.

Kolpakov. How would you now formulate the military goal of ***Ukraine***? How do you imagine - if you imagine it - a military victory?

- Yes. Minimize the number of victims, shorten the duration of this war. Withdraw the troops of the Russian Federation to compromise territories - and this is all that was before February 24, before the attack. Let's go back there. I understand that it is impossible to force Russia to completely liberate the territory, this will lead to a third world war. I understand everything perfectly and I am aware of [this]. That's why I say it's a compromise. Go back to where it all started, and there we will try to solve the issue of Donbass, the complex issue of Donbass.

Look, I'm not 70 years old - you will understand what I mean. I'm not 70 years old, I definitely have time. But I'm not here for long, and a worthy man will come after me. I want to end this war, I don't want hundreds of thousands of dead. I do not want it. And so I did not consider a forceful attack - neither on the Donbass, nor on the Crimea. Because I deeply understand how many thousands of our people would die. And what would be the price of these territories, even if they were reclaimed.

Nobody knows. Now the Russians have entered with their might - about 20 thousand dead. With all your might. And they, excuse me, did not enter Kyiv. Until they entered. You must understand that they are unlikely to enter. But if they enter, you must understand for sure that they then need to have a hundred thousand. There is no other way to cope with such a city, with such a population. In Kyiv, the living population of those who did not leave is three million. Do you understand what it is? It's just a huge number of people.

Solovyov . Mr. President, while we are talking, the news came that the head of the LPR announced that he intended to hold a referendum on joining Russia. I suppose that soon the authorities of the DPR will follow this example. What then can be a solution or discussion of the issue of Donbass?

"Look, you and I live in a certain space... We are trying to live in a certain space of legitimacy, right? When someone says something, you need that someone to represent something. Or themselves, or this or that territory at the legal level. The law is in the understanding of international institutions, and not on individual occupied parts. Therefore, whoever declares what is the right of every person (if these are true people).

Never mind. We heard signals from these comrades, "athletes" - that's what we called them in the 1990s. When I was at the university, we called these people athletes. These are not those who are medals ... But they just behave as if they are great. Well, these are the athletes in sweatpants. And then they changed into costumes and became what they became. But he remained in sweatpants under this suit. Both sweatpants and striped t-shirts.

So I don't know what they represent and what they claim. Surely - I agree with your rhetoric - other offices of the Russian Federation on the territory of ***Ukraine*** will follow him. For me, this is such a CEO of President Putin. I'll probably talk about this with the owner of these people, and not with these comrades, if you don't mind.

Dzyadko. Vladimir Alexandrovich, representatives of your office said that in recent weeks you have survived more than ten assassination attempts. Can you elaborate on this? What was it, where, when and how?

"Nothing to say, really. Our security takes care of these issues and the elimination of problematic elements that come here to hunt. Nothing more to say.

Zygar. Since we are running out of time ... Maybe you have some kind of appeal to those citizens of Russia or Russian people who will watch our conversation with you on various channels? What would you say to them?

- I think it's an important thing that all people should understand once again: no matter what, we understand that in Russia - as well as among the citizens of Russia who left the Russian Federation - forever or not for a long time, it doesn't matter, for sure there is a large percentage of people who support the truth. I won't even force them to say that they support ***Ukraine*** - [just] support the truth. Because it is important to understand the truth yourself and dot the "and". [But there is also] a large percentage of people who support the policy of the current president of the Russian Federation.

I just want all these parties to analyze the situation more, to support the truth and ***Ukraine*** more. To knock more on their neighbors, relatives, loved ones. Because without this it is impossible to pass this... This informational curtain, which used to be iron, but now it has become informational. It is impossible to break it without journalists, people of culture, people of art, writers, actors. Teachers who can give knowledge to children. I know it's a risk. I know, I understand. But nevertheless, without it it will be impossible to finish anything. This war will not end, because the war will not end with the fact that we will end hostilities ... Protect our territory, and Russia will end its actions here - this will not end the war, you understand? Fences over which grenades fly do not prevent war. Something will end, such a moment will come. War ... You remember Preobrazhensky, devastation - it is in the minds. Therefore, the war will end when everyone wants to accept that it was a big mistake of the Russian authorities, which led to a catastrophe for the Russian people. And to the tragedy between the relations of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples. And when this becomes clear, only then will it be possible to conclude how long this war will drag on.

Therefore, it seems to me that you need to think about your children and grandchildren, there is nothing to think about yourself. Today, adults, like you and me, will never forgive each other for anything. I don't believe in it anymore. I just saw how the Russians react, I saw the percentage of support for Putin and so on. I mean, not him, but his actions. It's impossible. But we have to fight for our children and grandchildren. This is a great chance, because we understand that we will not move from these lands: neither we nor you, which is fair.

Therefore, to knock on all kinds of doors, on closed human doors. Knock and talk about it. After all, in fact, it is difficult to figure it out under the bombs, under the shots. And under this information attack, this is information bombardment. I don't know what was more terrible: informational bombardment or bullets - both are terrible. It is necessary to understand this for people who do not understand deeply. Try to accept it as a tragedy and try to solve it. Try to decide.

And we definitely want peace. Because if we didn't want to, believe me, we would be in Crimea tomorrow. If we had everything now at the level: "War! Forward! We ran, hurrah!" Yes, there is no "hooray!" We beat them on our territory. One of our soldiers beats ten Russians because they don't understand what they are doing here. That's all. And these people know for sure that his wife is now somewhere in Poland, with a child. Or in Volnovakha, she was crushed yesterday. That is why this nation has so many forces, not because it is special. But because we have a tragedy, and I'm trying to explain it.

Therefore, when Russia says: it should be in the documents that you will not take Crimea by military means ... Yes, we will not take it by military means: sorry for the people, sorry for our people. Because people will go there and die. Yes, it's just a pity. You still haven't done anything in these ten years. What is done there in Crimea? Are hotels built like in Dubai, or what? What is brought there? What's in the Donbass? Arena open? They just pierced her with a shell, and she stands. And it's impossible to do that, you know? People came with a different ideology.

I just don't want to waste time on this, you don't understand what's going on with these flooded mines [in Donbass]... And no one can understand, except these people, who is there. And with these underground waters ... There is a catastrophe in general. Do you think Putin wants this Donbass? He will take all the money from the Russians in order to "put things in order" there ...

When I became president, I began to study issues that I simply never knew in my life. And we were talking about the fact that we had mines, they are dragging money, and coal production is decreasing. And some miners need to be transferred from one mine to another. Somewhere coal mining worked, but somewhere it was necessary to close ... And these are all ghost towns. You can't just take a mine and flood it, you can't just blow it up like that - a catastrophe will begin. Social, humanitarian, ecological. And it's all there already.

Kolpakov. Why do you think Vladimir Putin needs this? What is the first thought that comes to your mind that could explain this? Why did this happen?

- Looks like a lot of things. What does one thought mean? One thought - like Dudya, when he asks questions, and someone answers him there? That won't work with me.

He has a multi-vector approach to this issue. To the question of Russia, its place in the world, the leadership of the Russian Federation and all those who left Russia. Who has the right to be not in Russia. There's a whole story here, you know? Historical approach. And these are different things: the Caucasus is the Caucasus, Georgians are Georgians, Moldovans are Moldovans, and ***Ukraine*** is ***Ukraine***.

***Ukraine*** is dangerous from many points of view. Firstly, this is the loss of the influence of the Russian language - it has lost several millions of the Russian-speaking population. He wants to return it all by force, which will lead to another wave, but let's not talk about it, I don't want to repeat it. The second is, of course, the success of ***Ukraine***. And due to geopolitics, location, people - he understands exactly what kind of people are here. Not quite yet, but still. Many people understand that such a reckless and hardworking people will, of course, economically jump out. And it is clear that there are economic risks from the point of view of the Russian Federation. Here they will look and think: why don't we try? We were told there that the European Union, in general, is not very - but very much! But look at the steps. And then, look, we have the same political situation is changing. Young people are coming. This is still according to his inner world - but what about him? What's next? And if it is possible there, why not in Russia? people will say. There are many reasons why he does this. This ambition "I want the Soviet Union" - well, how long does he have left to live? Yes, like any person who is 70-80 years old. Well, not 50 years to live yet.

Therefore, the plans for today's appeasement. Unfortunately, I believe that his plans are not strategic. The strategy is what will happen in a hundred years with the state, which he heads for a quarter of a century. I am definitely not an adviser to the Russian people, but I believe that this is a strategy. Strategy - what will not be after me. And what will happen after the fifth person, like me. What will happen in five generations, where will we be? I am interested in what will happen to ***Ukraine*** - I am interested in this as a citizen, for my children. And if I'm not interested, then France, Italy, Switzerland. Children go there, grandchildren go there. UK and so on. Not a forced departure, I do not compare this with dissidence or forced migration, namely when I have such plans - to make money there too.

[Putin] has a different approach. So that today, to be remembered. So that there was a monument - a Mausoleum, a monument, a letter. Today I see a diploma in these actions, I don't even see a monument. And I think it's a mistake. But I think that it is not his alone - the mistake of his entourage. He's in it, you know. Here, remember ... Well, okay, I will not compare with this leader, he is no longer there, so God bless him ...

Therefore, all this multi-vector nature and so on. And Abkhazia, and all this, of course, Russia will lose everything. But the problem is, how then will those people get along? It's the same with us in the Donbass, where children were washed for ten years at school: who are we, what kind of Nazis are we ... And how do we deal with this later? This is the problem.

This is me answering the question "What's next?" And what will happen in three generations, in five? This is problem. What's the point, they hammered nails, split it all. Someone has to do it.

The party was good, guys, but who will clean up?

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**Moody's studies fallout from Russia-Nato war**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 30, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 389 words

**Body**

Moody's Investor Service has assessed the fallout from a wider confrontation between Russia and Nato countries, RBC business portal reported citing the agency's report. The agency sees such a worst-case scenario escalation unlikely due to its severe humanitarian, political and economic consequences.

The baseline scenario of Moody's does not expect Russia's military invasion of ***Ukraine*** to spread to other countries. But the longer the armed conflict continues without a ceasefire or peace agreement, the greater the risk that it will spill beyond ***Ukraine***'s borders, the agency warns.

As far as the Western sanctions against Russia are concerned, even in the case of a ceasefire, the sanctions are expected to remain in place for at least the next two years, and possibly longer. A wider escalation of the ***Ukraine*** invasion could affect Poland and the Baltic states the most.

The founding agreements of both Nato and the European Union include provisions for collective defence, Moody's reminds. Among the main consequences of a hypothetical conflict, the agency sees: An escalation of cyber-attacks, including on "critical" infrastructure (defence facilities, energy and utilities, and possibly financial market infrastructure)  A wave of displacement and mass cross-border migration beyond the current estimated 3.5mn Ukrainian ***refugees***  Spiking budget deficits, as a significant part of the economic activity will have to be redirected to the production of weapons and military equipment, which will lead to significant budget deficits in Nato countries Further acceleration of global inflation, as Nato countries and their allies would likely sever all remaining ties with Russia, including cutting off Russian oil and gas imports, causing energy prices as well as prices for wheat, sunflower oil, corn and fertilisers to rise Further global supply chain disruptions

Moody's also discusses the risk of using biological, chemical or nuclear weapons. Any use of nuclear weapons would have dire consequences, radically reshaping international relations, and bring significant challenges to policy effectiveness on a global scale, the agency warns. In such a case, the central banks and governments would be forced to work hand in hand to manage the economy in crisis mode, financing the budget deficits with printed money.

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**EBRD slashes 2022 growth forecasts but only nations embroiled in war to enter recession**

Intellinews - Russia Today

March 31, 2022 Thursday

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**Body**

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has slashed its GDP forecasts for the emerging Europe economies for 2022, but all except those directly involved in the war in ***Ukraine*** - Russia, ***Ukraine*** and Belarus - will experience positive growth this year as the post-coronacrisis recovery continues.

Overall, the bank's 2022 growth projection across the EBRD regions, which include emerging Europe and some Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (Semed) economies, has been revised downwards by 2.5 percentage points (pp) to 1.7%, the EBRD announced on March 31.

The only economies to escape negative consequences from the war in ***Ukraine*** are two Eurasian oil and gas producers, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, whose forecasts for the year were raised.

According to the EBRD, Azerbaijan "could benefit from increased oil prices, and the move by European countries to alternative suppliers of oil and gas, thus boosting GDP growth in 2022".

Turkmenistan, meanwhile, is feeling the benefits of its "splendid isolation", said the EBRD, on top of its "immense energy reserves, strict rationing of access to hard currency, and its transportation-friendly location on the Caspian Sea".

Combatants' economies devastated

The worst impact, unsurprisingly, will be on ***Ukraine***, whose war-ravaged economy is set to contract by 20% this year, a 23.5 pp downward revision compared to the bank's last set of projections issued in November 2021.

According to the EBRD, at present the war is happening on territories that produce around 60% of Ukrainian GDP. It cites a National Bank of ***Ukraine*** (NBU) estimate that 30% of businesses have stopped production and electricity consumption has dropped to around 60% of the pre-war level. In turn, says the EBRD, "This is severely weakening companies' finances, with some being even physically damaged, thus exposing the banking sector to a drastic deterioration of asset quality."

In one positive recent development, ***Ukraine*** managed to hook up its electricity system to the continental European Energy System ahead of schedule, and it disconnected from the grids of Russia and Belarus just hours before the invasion.

Russia's economy, meanwhile, is projected to contract by 10%, a 13 pp downward revision. "Initially it was believed that the robust situation of the Russian economy, arising thanks to the `Fortress Russia' policy settings of the past few years, would mean the economy would be well placed to withstand the short-term impact of economic sanctions ... However, as the severity of the sanctions imposed increases on an almost daily basis, it is clear that the economy will be hit hard," said the EBRD report. "Sanctions on energy exports and the exclusion of banks from SWIFT have gone from being considered beyond the pale, due to the associated collateral damage, to a reality."

Russia's economy, meanwhile, is projected to contract by 10%, a 13 pp downward revision. "Initially it was believed that the robust situation of the Russian economy, arising thanks to the fiscal fortress policy settings of the past few years, would mean the economy would be well placed to withstand the short-term impact of economic sanctions ... However, as the severity of the sanctions imposed increases on an almost daily basis, it is clear that the economy will be hit hard," said the EBRD report. "Sanctions on energy exports and the exclusion of banks from SWIFT have gone from being considered beyond the pale, due to the associated collateral damage, to a reality."

There is a lot of uncertainty over how big Russia's economic contraction will be this year as much depends on what sanctions remain on Russia, which new sanctions will be applied, and how effective the implementation of the sanctions regime will be. A survey recently carried out by the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) of independent professional economists expected the contraction to be between an 8% to 15% contraction in 2022.

Belarus, which has been included in western sanctions, is expected to see a more modest contraction of a 3.2 pp downward revision.

The EBRD is in the process of closing its resident offices in Moscow and Minsk, as announced in a press release on March 29, in which it affirmed its "unwavering support" for ***Ukraine***. The bank had already suspended all new investment activity in Russia following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, as well as making any new private sector investments into Belarus following the disputed presidential election in August 2020.

Multiple effects of war

As economies across the region face what the EBRD describes as the greatest supply shock since at least the early 1970s, the war "will have a severe effect on economies far beyond the immediate area of the conflict", the development bank said.

"The war on ***Ukraine*** is having a profound impact on the economies in the EBRD regions as well as globally. Inflationary pressures were already high prior to the war and they will certainly increase now, which will have a disproportionate effect on many lower income countries where we work as well as on the poorer segments of the population in most countries," said Beata Javorcik, EBRD chief economist.

The bank forecast that that the increased cost for commodities such as food, oil, gas and metals will have a "profound impact" on economies, particularly those in lower income countries. As it pointed out, Russia and ***Ukraine*** supply a large amount of commodities, including wheat, corn, fertiliser, titanium and nickel.

The main direct impact on emerging Europe's second-largest economy, Turkey, will be via higher commodity import prices, particularly energy and wheat. Turkey imports 93% of its oil and 99% of its gas needs. On top of that, tourist arrivals to the Black Sea country are expected to be hit by the war; in a typical year Russia and ***Ukraine*** provide over 20% of Turkey's tourists.

Both these are happening at a time when Turkey is pursuing an economic model that relies on balancing the current account in order to achieve macroeconomic stability. "The higher cost of imports and loss of tourism revenues would not only make achieving current account balance difficult, but also make it harder for the central bank to rebuild its severely diminished foreign exchange reserves, limiting its ability to support the lira if needed," warned the EBRD.

"The failure to balance the current account will dent investor confidence in the ability of the new economic model to maintain macroeconomic stability, putting further pressure on the lira, potentially increasing dollarisation once again, and give rise to even more inflationary pressure. These indirect effects in the form of the failure of the new economic model would potentially have a greater impact on activity than the direct impact of a fall in tourism revenues and rising oil prices."

All of the Western Balkans countries are also expected to be affected by higher oil prices, while some are also vulnerable to rises in prices of gas and electricity.

Spillover on Central Asia and the Caucasus

Aside from commodities, economies in the region will be affected through several other channels.

All the Central Asian economies except Turkmenistan are forecast to experience lower-than-expected growth this year, with the EBRD making the biggest downward revisions for the region's two poorest countries, Kyrgyzstan (-4.0 pp) and Tajikistan (-3.2 pp). These economies have been "badly hit by the fall in the value of the ruble and restrictions on its convertibility, as they are heavily dependent on remittances received from Russia," the EBRD said.

Remittances from Russia typically amount to between 5% to as much as 30% of GDP in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Yet another factor weighing on the Caucasus and Central Asia is the pressure on their currencies as markets have been reassessing geo-political risks.

Tourism recovery postponed

There are already signs the war is having an impact on the tourism sector in the wider region, which is expected to be damaging for countries with substantial tourism sectors such as Armenia, Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro.

This comes on top of the severe damage to the sector during the first two years of the pandemic, and dashes hopes of a robust rebound in summer 2022.

Before the war and the pandemic, spending by Russian tourists accounted for 1-2% of GDP in Armenia, Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro. Bulgaria received 450,000 Russian tourists in 2019 and is thus also expected to suffer, while other tourism-dependent countries like Croatia don't rely on Russian or Ukrainian tourists but are likely to feel the impact of a fall in tourist appetite from western countries.

Central Europe manufacturing affected

The Central European economies with large automotive sectors - as well as some in Southeast Europe like Romania and Slovenia - have been affected as manufacturing supply chains with ***Ukraine*** are hit. "Owing to lack of deliveries of parts from ***Ukraine***, a number of car factories had to partially or fully suspend production and look for alternative suppliers as hostilities escalated," said the EBRD.

This is a factor in some countries in the Western Balkans too, where Bosnia & Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia are set to be the hardest hit.

In Central Europe, Latvia has been identified as the worst affected country, with its GDP growth forecast revised downwards by 3.5 pp to 2.0%. As the EBRD notes, "trade restrictions will have a greater effect on smaller Baltic countries"; Russia is still one of the most important markets for Latvian and Lithuanian goods exports.

***Refugees*** arrive in huge numbers

Within Southeast Europe, Moldova is particularly vulnerable given its location on ***Ukraine***'s western flank, and its forecast has been revised downwards by 2.0 pp to 2.0%.  Moldova, Poland and other countries bordering ***Ukraine*** have received ***refugees*** in what has become the greatest forced displacement of people since the Second World War, with Moldova, as one of Europe's poorest countries, particularly ill-equipped to handle this despite the best efforts of the population.

Commenting on the short- and long-term of the influx of ***refugees*** from ***Ukraine***, the EBRD said: "Skilled workers from ***Ukraine*** may provide a boost to some economies in the longer term, particularly in countries with ageing populations. In the short term, economies are facing fiscal pressures and administrative challenges as they scale up the provision of housing, healthcare and schooling."

Better times ahead?

The EBRD forecasts stronger growth of 5% across the region in 2023, including a strong rebound in ***Ukraine***.

This is based on the assumption that "a ceasefire is brokered within a couple of months, followed soon after by the start of a major reconstruction effort in ***Ukraine*** which will bring GDP by end-2023 back close to, but still below, pre-war levels", its press release said.

In the latest developments on March 29, there were some tentatively positive signs, as Russia said it would "drastically reduce combat operations" around Kyiv and the northern city of Chernihiv.

On the other hand, no such rebound is expected in Russia. "Sanctions on Russia are expected to remain for the foreseeable future, condemning the Russian economy to stagnation in 2023 (after a sharp GDP drop in 2022), with negative spillovers for a number of neighbouring countries in eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia," the EBRD said.

Three years of turmoil

Finally, the EBRD produced a set of figures showing the change in GDP between 2019 - the last `normal' year before the pandemic and subsequent war - and 2022.

By this measure, Serbia was the strongest performer, with projected growth of 11.9% over the period, mainly thanks to its mild contraction during the first year of the pandemic and robust rebound the following year. Despite its financial upheavals, Turkey is forecast to be another strong performer, as is Lithuania.

At the other extreme, ***Ukraine*** and Russia are projected to have the deepest economic contractions over the 2019-2022 period.

Given the high level of uncertainty at present, the EBRD plans to produce another set of forecasts later in the spring.

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**End of Document**

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**COMMENT: Russia's military campaign in Ukraine moves into 'Phase 2'**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 4, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 3248 words

**Body**

On March 29, President Erdogan of Turkey hosted a short session of talks at the Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul between ***Ukraine*** Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov and Russian Presidential Aide Vladimir Medinsky. Before the talks Kyiv tabled a wish list of 15 items summarising how it would be willing to make peace. Some general chat followed (the full meeting lasted three hours), after which the delegates departed to report back to their respective presidents.

Within hours the ten-point list of peace proposals was being described by the Financial Times as a draft peace agreement which had been "discussed in full" before the Istanbul meeting. Russia's negotiators swiftly rebutted that description. The Financial Times did not claim to have seen the document, and stated that it was reporting on it second hand, based on descriptions provided by four unnamed sources, which are almost certainly senior members of the US State Department who have been briefed by Kyiv.

One named source for the FT article was Mykhailo Podolyak, a senior adviser to President Zelenskiy and who was at Dolmabahce. Podolyak's summary suggests that the 10-point plan stipulates a full Russian troop withdrawal to the February 24 start lines, offers a commitment from ***Ukraine*** never to apply to join Nato, demands the continued existence of Ukrainian land forces and offers a commitment not to host foreign troops or exercises on Ukrainian territory.

Other sources suggest that part of the proposal is some form of security guarantee to be underwritten by one or more third-party states. Another reported provision is a protective guarantee for Russian language use (currently banned from all official business as well as education by the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language, which was signed into force in May 2019. The law also requires all citizens of ***Ukraine*** to be able to speak fluent Ukrainian).

Kyiv has reportedly included permission for it to join the European Union in due course in its 10 points.

It is very clear that the plan is not acceptable in Moscow. Also clear is that it is not a "draft peace treaty", but rather a list of items which Kyiv would find acceptable. Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov did welcome Kyiv's willingness to adopt neutrality, saying: "This option is really being discussed now, and is one that can be considered neutral."

Oddly, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that "absolutely specific wordings" were "close to being agreed" in the negotiations, which probably means that the wording of the parts of the plan that Moscow likes (neutrality, language and foreign bases) is close to agreement, but not much else.

Outside Dolmabahce, descriptions of what is actually happening in ***Ukraine*** still divide into two competing narratives, as bne IntelliNews reported three weeks ago, one from the Western powers ("West") and the other from Moscow ("East").

The West's narrative is that Russia's military campaign continues to be stalled, that Russian forces are being pushed back by Ukrainian counterattacks, that Russian forces are carrying out gross violations of the law of armed conflict by shelling civilians and civilian infrastructure, and that Russia's economy is on the point of collapse. The West claims that Russian dead number up to 17,000, with twice that number wounded. The West's picture is illustrated by maps published by the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington based think-tank headed by Under-Secretary of State Victoria Nuland's brother-in-law Fred Kagan.

The East's narrative is quite different. The siege of Mariupol is some 90% complete, that the Azov and Aidar brigades in Mariupol are responsible for preventing civilian evacuations (by shooting or shelling evacuees), that Russian forces are moving steadily north and south behind ***Ukraine***'s Joint Forces Operation (the JFO with 65,000 men on the Donbas border) to trap the JFO and destroy it, that the JFO is unable to move for lack of diesel and gasoline, and is running out of ammunition, and that Russian dead numbered 1,300 at the start of this week. The East tables its own maps, which see little light of day in any European or US media channels.

The East's narrative continues that Moscow's plan is to surround the JFO and either destroy it or capture it; that Russian forces have now surrounded Zaporozhye, Dnipro and Kharkiv, and that Ukrainian forces elsewhere in ***Ukraine*** are now unable to manoeuvre or fly for lack of fuel, tanks and functioning aircraft. Russian forces poised outside Kyiv and Chernihiv are withdrawing as a trust-building move. The East's narrative is supported by regular announcements of the capture of named towns and settlements flowing from Moscow's Ministry of Defence, but not by Russian video reportage.

Both narratives agree that Russian cruise missiles (mostly Kalibr) continue to bombard targets in western ***Ukraine***. In the East's narrative these are fuel, ammunition and concentrations of soldiers, while in Kyiv's narrative they are civilians and homes. Both sides also agree that the battle for Mariupol has killed many thousands of civilians. How many is, at present, unknown, but the local authorities previously said over 5,000 citizens had been killed. Many more must have died in the meantime thanks to the heavy shelling.

Russia's narrative is largely unsupported by corroborating video evidence, but not completely. Two non-Russian sources are currently reporting daily from within Russian-controlled territory. In Kharkiv a Chilean national files daily reports which tend to confirm that the city of Kharkiv is peaceful, having been by-passed by Russian forces. In Mariupol and the Donbas an independent American reporter also files video reportage daily, sometimes two or three times per day.

Footage filed by this individual from Western Mariupol yesterday showed extensive shell-damage to residential apartment blocks - few blocks in view were un-damaged. In the background of the footage can be clearly heard intense artillery and small-arms fire, described by one interviewee as being 400-500 metres from the filming location in Mariupol's Zhovtnevyi District. We take this as evidence that Ukrainian forces (probably of the Azov and Aidar brigades) were still holding ground in central Mariupol as late of late April 1. Other reports suggest that Ukrainian forces also still hold ground in the Azovstal steelworks on the left bank of the Kalmius River.

So it seems Mariupol has still not been fully taken by Russian forces. Video reportage from Mariupol strongly corroborates estimates from both sides of civilian deaths in the city at many thousands. Mariupol, with a population of 400,000, is a city of some 4,000 standard Soviet-era apartment blocks, each with a resident population of around a hundred people. Eye-witness reports from areas fought over in the siege consistently tell of multiple mortalities in many, probably most, blocks. Reports of unburied corpses are corroborated by video footage, and accompanied by reports of mass graves hurriedly dug and covered. It appears likely that civilian mortality in Mariupol will top 10,000, and might rise as high as 20,000 people.

The lack of other video reportage from the city is striking, and is a result of Moscow's strategy to draw Western news teams to Kyiv early in the war.

Eye-witness reports from Dnipro describe the presence of Russian forces outside the city, and it is widely acknowledged that Russian troops are in control of the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant (NPP).

Each observer is entitled to draw their own conclusions on the competing narratives, but in my opinion the weight of evidence seems to support the East's as being the correct one.

Moscow is now referring to the start of a "Phase 2" of the war, but it is not clear at all what Phase 2 means in practice, since the initial invasion was not referred to as Phase 1 but as a special military operation with two goals, which are being achieved in parallel. Those goals (denazification and de-militarisation) are sufficiently ambiguous to permit any number of phases, according to choice. So what is Phase 2?

One answer might be the surrounding and capture/destruction of the JFO, but it is more likely that that was the core objective of Phase 1.

Phase 2 might be a new threat - of armed thrusts against one or both of Kyiv and Odesa, or even into the open space of Western ***Ukraine***. The Kyiv thrust at the start of the war advanced for a week and then stopped. Kyiv has consistently claimed that Russian troops have been outfought by Ukrainian defenders, a claim which lacks credibility since it is completely unsupported by any actual footage of major engagements. Instead the reportage that has emerged (from a press corps in Kyiv numbering well into three figures) is of minor skirmishes, occasional shell strikes and no significant movement of forces on either side, all of which is completely inconsistent with a determined attempt to attack Kyiv itself, but entirely consistent with a distracting "poise" on the part of Russian forces. It is also consistent with a lack of Russian offensive action, since to-camera reports from Kyiv rarely, if ever, contain any background evidence of conflict (artillery exchanges, small-arms fire or movements of armoured vehicles or aircraft).

Incidentally, Russian sources claim that much of the actual small-arms fire in and around Kyiv is generated by blue-on-blue engagements between Ukrainian militias, and/or from gang warfare between criminals armed by ***Ukraine***'s government. That may or may not be true, but both are reasonably likely in the known circumstances.

Moscow's use of second-line, light airborne and militia forces on the Kyiv front is further corroboration of the view that the front is a deliberate maskirovka for objectives elsewhere.

The Odesa front is interesting for its complete lack of reportage and movement. After taking Kherson in the first week of the war Russian forces moved west to take Mikolayev/Nikolayev, and then appeared to stop. Poised north-east of Odesa and less than 100 km from friendly forces in Transnistria, Russian troops sat, appearing to do nothing. While they sat Odesa has fortified itself for an assault, mining roads and beaches and equipping the city with a maze of barbed wire obstacles.

What seems more likely that is that Moscow had no intention of either attacking Odesa or of cutting it off from the rest of ***Ukraine***. If one objective is to halt the flow of grain exports and oil imports through Odesa and Chernomorsk that can be served easily and without casualties by the Russian Navy, which does indeed appear to be blockading the port. At present AIS data shows some 40 ships alongside in Odesa and neighbouring ports and estuaries, and none en route to or from ***Ukraine*** via those ports. ***Ukraine*** added to the blockade by laying hundreds of sea mines off Odesa, and is now talking to Romania about using Constanta as a grain export route.

Equally unlikely is an attempt by Moscow to occupy the whole of Western ***Ukraine*** from its front at Odesa. Apart from the high cost in men and machinery of an attack on ***Ukraine***'s national, and nationalist, heartland, the sheer size of the space to be occupied dwarfs the available manpower. West ***Ukraine*** covers 250,000 square kilometres, the size of the whole of the United Kingdom for comparison.

Russia has been here before, painfully. Between 1945 and 1949 Russia occupied West ***Ukraine*** in force with some 500,000 men; 49,000 of these were killed in the process by the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists. The OUN's forces were much smaller, less well equipped and less well supplied than the present ***Ukraine*** army. Pacification of West ***Ukraine*** also included the deportation of some 900,000 people to camps in east Russia. Ukrainian nationalist dislike of Russia has deep roots in history.

In light of this experience it seems inconceivable that Moscow would choose to extend its invasion of ***Ukraine*** to include Western ***Ukraine***, but it must be said that Russian President Vladimir Putin does not necessarily share a cool rational view of what is inconceivable - the war itself is clear evidence of that. There are evidential straws in the wind, which support the thesis that Phase 2 would be a Russian invasion of West ***Ukraine***. The first of these is the presence of a large Belarusian force poised on the northern border of West ***Ukraine***. Its presence begs the question of "why"? Is the reason for that presence a Russian plan to invade West ***Ukraine*** from the north and east? Quite possibly - we have been here before, recently.

The second straw is a military one - an invasion of West ***Ukraine*** would take a Russian force of at least 100,000 men. That 100,000 is currently fully occupied surrounding ***Ukraine***'s JFO on the Donbas border. Once the JFO surrenders (perhaps 20 days from now) Russia's main force would be available for a new campaign in West ***Ukraine***, just 200 km west of its current positions.

The third straw is the lurking threat of supporting attacks by Russian amphibious forces, which might land west of Odesa, and/or from forces in Transnistria. And the fourth straw is visual evidence of the arrival of reinforcements from central Russia on ***Ukraine***'s borders. Add to that mix Putin's essay last year on the non-status of ***Ukraine***, plus the fact that the heartland of Ukrainian ultra-right nationalism is in Lviv, and an invasion of West ***Ukraine*** moves from "inconceivable" to "possible, even likely".

Combine the physical aspects listed above with the firmly established image of Moscow in the eyes of Western media, politicians and peoples as non-rational, even psychopathic, and the threat that Phase 2 is actually an armed invasion and occupation of West ***Ukraine*** becomes a credible possibility to the Western mind.

We simply don't know the truth. There is a significant probability that Moscow is using its ambiguous reference to Phase 2 to stand up a threat to Western ***Ukraine*** just in order to be able to place it on the negotiating table as a major concession towards a peace. The standstill order to forces outside Kyiv could be the first conciliatory step in that direction.

There is a fourth candidate for Phase 2. Moscow has been vague on its plans for Trans-Dnepr ***Ukraine*** - the territory between the Dnepr River and the Donbas. The keys to this area (which produces half of ***Ukraine***'s wheat and sunflower oil, and all of its small flow of domestic oil and gas) are two dozen bridges across the Dnepr River. Nine are in Kyiv, blocked in practice by the forces poised east and west of Kyiv. Three, in or near Kherson, are now in Russian hands. Nine more (at Zaporozhye and Dnipro) are probably isolated from territory to the east by Russian forces investing the two cities. That leaves four bridges at Kremenchuk and Cherkassy currently available to ***Ukraine*** to move forces and supplies across the Dnepr. Is Phase 2 the capture of those remaining bridges? With Trans-Dnepr ***Ukraine*** cut off and the JFO captured, a Russian occupation of the rest of Trans-Dnepr would take only a few days to complete.

Moscow's intentions for Trans-Dnepr are not entirely obscure. Two weeks ago it announced plans to hold a referendum on independence in Kherson. Kherson city accounts for just under one third of the population of Kherson oblast of 280,000, and the oblast's territory extends well west of the Dnepr. The referendum announcement triggered immediate protests in Kherson city, which appear to have continued (according to footage hosted by an Indian news channel on April 1). The 2001 census recorded that over 80% of Kherson's population claimed Ukrainian ethnicity and only 14% Russian, though for many the choice may have been one of convenience over conviction, but a 2014 survey reported that only 10% of the population supported re-unification with Russia.

Given Kherson's location next door to Crimea and its control over Crimea's water supply, it is highly likely that Moscow will want to retain possession of Kherson whatever its population thinks, but a referendum in Kherson alone looks unlikely to deliver a vote for independence or unification with Russia.

So, If Phase 2's objective is to gain a vote for some form of independence, Kherson's Ukrainian loyalties would have to be diluted within a larger electorate. Russia is unlikely to worry overmuch about the existing Oblast boundaries, many of which either cross or even straddle the Dnepr. A referendum plan which exploits Russian ethnic concentrations further east (Russians to the east of the Dnepr, Ukrainians to the west), ***refugee*** flight (ethnic Ukrainians leaving eastern oblasts for shelter in West ***Ukraine***), ethnicity switching (people of mixed ethnicity who are happy with either so long as they can live in peace), financial inducements (significantly better pensions, benefits immediately, plus better economic opportunities for the young in Russia), gerrymandering (ensuring that the more-Russian Zaporozhians vote together with the less-Russian Khersonians) and old fashioned ballot-stuffing might deliver a collective vote for independence east of the Dnepr river.

Kyiv has, of course, publicly stated its red line as the retention of all oblasts other than Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk. However, if Russia wins the ground war in east ***Ukraine*** (which looks certain at this point) there will be little Kyiv can do to enforce that red line. Evidence that President Zelenskiy knows how weak his prospects are can be found in the fact that it is Kyiv which has asked for peace talks and pre-tabled concessions, and that it is Kyiv which is pleading for a no-fly zone and additional supplies of weapons.

Having fallen on deaf ears among European politicians, both of these pleas have now migrated to glossy advertisements on social media channels aimed at the Western mass audience, which must be the first time in history that a belligerent in a major war has bought popular mass media exposure among neutral states to drum up support.

While we try to work out the meaning of Phase 2, and count the days until the JFO gives up, the East's political and economic conflict with the West continues. The West's hopes that Russia's economy would collapse when its foreign reserves were frozen have proved empty. Indeed, the ruble has returned to its value on the day before the invasion began and Russia is selling oil and gas to both India and China despite US attempts to sanction energy sales. Reports from inside Russia consistently reveal wide popular support for the war, enhanced this week by video reportage (posted apparently by Ukrainians) of Russian prisoners of war lying bound and hooded being mutilated and even murdered by Ukrainian soldiers. Beijing has expressed support for Russia (though not for the war itself) along with a clear intention to ignore US sanctions aimed at dividing Russia and China. Most African nations have declared a firm neutrality.

If Moscow's Phase 2 is limited to the excision of Trans-Dnepr from Kyiv then the moment of maximum danger for Nato's European members may have passed. However, if Phase 2 turns out to be an invasion of West ***Ukraine*** it will return with a vengeance. Russian troops on the Dnepr is one (perhaps acceptable) thing to Europe. Russian troops on the borders of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Romania quite another. An invasion of West ***Ukraine*** could well trigger the Nato/Russia war that we have so far avoided.

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**End of Document**

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**LONG READ: Afghanistan key to uncorking Russia's access to South Asia**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 4, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 3058 words

**Body**

Russia has definitively broken with the West. Its war on ***Ukraine*** will permanently wreck its trade relations with the EU, collectively its biggest trade partner, and to a lesser extent with the US. Russia's trade relations with China have blossomed in recent years but in its hunt for new markets it needs to uncork the southern route out of Eurasia and into the massive markets of Pakistan and India. Afghanistan is the key and for the first time in over a century Central Asia has become central to geopolitics.

In 2021, the total trade in goods between the EU and Russia amounted to €257.5bn. The EU's imports were worth €158.5bn, of which fuels accounted for just under €100bn. In the same year, trade turnover with China topped $141bn, after rising by just under a third year on year, putting it on course to hit the $200bn target the two countries have set.

The war in ***Ukraine*** will change Russia's trade calculus dramatically. Last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin was actively pushing the EU to sign off on new long-term gas supply contracts and give permission for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to be put into action. But following Russia's attack on ***Ukraine*** launched on February 24, the EU is now committed to stopping all imports of Russian hydrocarbons as soon as 2025. That will knock a €100bn hole in Russia's EU trade regime, a regime that has already lost €100bn after Russia banned EU agricultural imports in tit-for-tat sanctions imposed in 2014.

One option to fill the hole is to boost trade with China and in particular sell Beijing more gas. Russia signed a new gas deal with China in February to boost volumes, but currently Russia only sends 13bcm of gas a year to China compared with the 155bcm it sold Europe in 2021.

And even under the new deal the volumes will not increase significantly from that level. Russia's national gas company Gazprom announced on February 4 that it had agreed on the annual sale of 10bcm per year of natural gas to China's CNPC over a 30-year period. The agreement underpins the development of a new export route for Russian gas to China in the Far East.

Part of the problem is that the massive Yamal gas fields in Russia's Arctic regions were targeting European markets and there are no pipelines connecting Yamal to the new Power of Siberia pipeline that serves China from Russian gas fields in Siberia. New and expensive infrastructure will have to be built.

The story is very different in Central Asia, which has been hooked into the Russian pipeline network since Soviet times. Both Russia and the five 'Stans' have long had their eye on the lucrative markets that start in Islamabad and stretch beyond, but have been locked off from Eurasia by instability and then a 20-year occupation of Afghanistan by the US. As bne IntelliNews has reported, the departure of the US from Afghanistan in July last year has changed the game and Afghanistan is back in play. Having longstanding relations with Kabul, Moscow has gone out of its way to cosy up to the resurgent Taliban in an effort to open up the country to trade. Last week, Russia announced a Taliban envoy already active in Moscow had been officially accredited.

Getting Afghanistan off its knees

Russia and its partners in Central Asia are actively working to open Afghanistan up to trade and transit. In the midst of the ***Ukraine*** war, Lavrov found time to fly to China to discuss Afghanistan with his fellow foreign ministers from the region.

Lavrov took the opportunity to fire broadsides at the international community but the Uzbek delegate pleaded that the rest of the world should not forget Afghanistan.

"In connection with known events in the world, we are unfortunately observing a certain decrease in the international community's attention to Afghanistan," Vladimir Norov, Uzbekistan's deputy foreign minister said. "The Afghan question has basically taken a back seat in world politics. This cannot be permitted."

The foreign ministers from Afghanistan, China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan all met in Tunxi for the talks. China also took some potshots saying that the US and Nato should "assume the primary responsibility for the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan," The Associated Press reported, quoting its Foreign Ministry.

The main message from the meeting in Tunxi was that the West should take an active lead in helping Afghanistan to get off its knees. China led calls for the return of frozen assets to Afghanistan and Uzbekistan has been pushing for sanctions relief since soon after the Taliban takeover. Tashkent recently joined forces with Pakistan to lobby for the lifting of sanctions.

"Afghanistan is now at a decisive stage," Norov warned. "Either this country will, with the assistance of the international community, create the pre-conditions to lay the foundations for a normal economy and development, or it will again become a refuge for terrorist and extremist organisations."

Opening up trade

Russia's war in ***Ukraine*** has plainly, to varying degrees, unnerved the leaders of the five Stans. Despite the Kremlin's substantial economic, political, military and soft-power capital in the region, keeping these nations on side will be no mean feat. The West's attempt to sideline Russia with heavy sanctions has and will cause enormous disruption and economic losses to Central Asia. Staying close by a new-era Russia's side will not be an easy road to travel, though when it came to the vote in the UN General Assembly vote on March 3 to condemn Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine***, all of the Central Asian states chose to abstain. Keeping their relations sweet with Russia was clearly more important to them than standing with the international community's condemnation of the unprovoked attack on ***Ukraine***.

Securing trade and energy infrastructure routes between Russia, Central Asia and South Asia is a major plank of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Even before the US withdrawal, Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev used his first speech at the UNGA to call for an international committee to be set up under the auspices of the UN to improve Afghanistan's security and help it along with its economic development. Mirziyoyev identified Afghanistan as the major security issue in his region but at the same time has promoted business and trade, building a power line over the border amongst other things.

Since last year, the Uzbeks have announced modest, incremental but meaningful progress in working with the Taliban-regime in Afghanistan and Islamabad in developing rail and road trade corridors linking Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Afghan territory.

In mid-March, for the first time, Indian cargo, mostly sugar, transited to Uzbekistan via Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Uzbeks are also looking at completing a rail link to China, via Kyrgyzstan, and reaching Iran's sole oceanic port of Chabahar on the Indian Ocean via Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan's Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea is a rival.

No doubt Moscow in its new reality would like to piggy-back on the success achieved in developing these trade routes so far and back negotiations to achieve an extensive opening up of the opportunities.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov already started actively courting Pakistan last year, perhaps in preparation for the collapse of relations with the West he must have been aware was on the cards. He visited Islamabad in April 2021 for two days in his first visit to Pakistan since 2012, arriving from a trip to India previously. Afghanistan topped the agenda in talks with his Pakistani counterpart, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, but the two foreign ministers also discussed bilateral ties and economic cooperation.

Russia has also already been actively preparing another key strategic energy transport route that runs across Mongolia to tap the northern Chinese market. In late February, Russia and Mongolia signed a project plan for the Soyuz/Vostok gas pipeline that would run from Russia to China via Mongolian territory.

Also, in mid-February, Pakistan's energy minister said the South Asia country had been holding talks with Russia on the potential construction of a Kazakhstan-Pakistan gas pipeline. Then there is the perennial question of whether the planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline will ever be completed. Perhaps with its new need to integrate the economies of Russia, Central, South and East Asia, Moscow could even take a stake in this project. The Taliban, eager to secure some recognition and economic stability for their Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, are keen on TAPI and have already provided the Turkmens with security guarantees for the infrastructure.

**Hesitant Stans**

An open question remains: How much political resistance might there be in Central Asia to playing a crux role in helping Moscow realise its new trade and economic ambitions?

Uzbekistan became the first former Soviet Central Asian country to properly distance itself from Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine***. It said it insists on ***Ukraine***'s territorial integrity and will not recognise Russia's puppet republics in Luhansk and Donetsk on March 18, three weeks into the war.

"Uzbekistan recognises the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of ***Ukraine***. We have not recognised the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics," Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov stressed as he addressed a Senate session on March 17.

"Uzbekistan has historically had traditional comprehensive ties with both Russia and ***Ukraine***," the minister said. "Last year, the trade turnover with ***Ukraine*** exceeded $704mn, which is 60% more than in 2020. Co-operation for the current year included a plan of various events in Tashkent and ***Ukraine***."

The Kazakhs have since followed suit. On April 1,m Timur Suleimenov, deputy chief of the Kazakh presidential office, told Euractive that Kazakhstan will not help Russia to evade Western sanctions imposed over its ongoing invasion of ***Ukraine***.

Kazakhstan "will continue to invest in Russia and attract investment for Russia: there is no way for our economy to do it differently," he said in an interview. "But we will do our best to control the sanctioned goods. We will do our best to control any investment from a sanctioned person or entity in Kazakhstan, and this is something we wanted to convey to Europeans openly."

Suleimenov then went further in setting Nur-Sultan apart from Vladimir Putin's Russia, saying: "Kazakhstan is not part of this conflict. Yes, we are part of the Eurasian Economic Union [EEU] but we are an independent state with our own system, and we will abide by the restrictions imposed on Russia and Belarus. We don't want and will not risk being placed in the same basket."

Given that Kazakhstan is a member of the Russia-led EEU-the other members being Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia-and as recently as January saw its president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, invite in Russian troops in an urgent move that appeared aimed at saving his presidency from a coup, Moscow might be somewhat anxious that the Kazakhs are not proving more amenable.

As Russia tries to remodel its trade relations in its now dollarless world, Moscow may be disappointed with the less than helpful attitudes of some of its partners. EEU members Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan both recently refused to accept customs duties from Russia in rubles, a decision echoed by Armenia.

Paul Stronski, a senior fellow at think tank Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the refusals raise "questions over the cohesion of the bloc, which has long been Putin's pet initiative to integrate the region, although it has not progressed far since its 2014 launch".

Other actions, observed Stronski "suggest greater [post-invasion] resistance to Moscow than initial diplomatic statements indicated. "Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have disputed Kremlin readouts of bilateral presidential phone calls that suggested greater support for the war than Central Asian leaders were willing to acknowledge," he said. "As the Russian military campaign struggled and the extent of human suffering in ***Ukraine*** became increasingly evident, the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan moved beyond muted expressions of concern to more open critique. They allowed some anti-war protests, permitted civil society groups to collect humanitarian assistance for ***Ukraine***, and clamped down on local displays of the 'Z' sign used by supporters of the war. Those three governments also reiterated their commitment to ***Ukraine***'s territorial integrity. The overlaps and variations of the shifting Central Asian responses to the war illustrate each nation's delicate navigation of the crisis."

Mirziyoyev's first foreign trip as president was to Moscow as Russia remains the dominate force in the region, but at the same time the Uzbek president would prefer to keep Russia at arms length. Despite pressure from Moscow, Tashkent has never committed itself to one day joining the EEU and has always made it clear its foreign policy is aimed at retaining good and constructive relations with all the major players including Russia, the US, the EU and China.

"Like other Central Asian states, the government in Tashkent remains hesitant to assign blame for the war. It has expressed its 'deep concern' and urged a diplomatic solution to end the 'military activity and aggression' to distance itself from Moscow's actions. An authoritarian country, Uzbekistan has not sanctioned anti-war rallies and has reined in independent coverage of the war on social media. Yet it has allowed subtle demonstrations of support for Kyiv, including displays of the Ukrainian flag at prominent locations in Tashkent and Samarkand, and tolerated small gatherings outside the Ukrainian embassy. Neither could happen without official sanction," said Stronski.

Stronski also noted that as the Russian military has struggled in ***Ukraine***, Tashkent has grown more vocal in its support for Kyiv. "During a March 17 address to parliament, Uzbekistan's long-serving foreign minister, Abdulaziz Komilov, declared that Uzbekistan would not recognize the Russian-controlled portions of eastern ***Ukraine*** as independent states and reiterated its commitment to Ukrainian territorial integrity."

Support from Kyrgyzstan

Perhaps the strongest support from Central Asia for Russia since it launched its war on ***Ukraine*** has come from Kyrgyzstan's populist strongman Sadyr Japarov, an autocrat who had to work hard to gain Vladimir Putin's endorsement after he ascended to the Kyrgyz presidency following an uprising at the end of 2020, amid accusations from the West that his proposed administration might provide rather too many openings for organised crime.

Before the invasion, Japarov mimicked Russian talking points to suggest Moscow's recognition of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern ***Ukraine*** may have been justified. "Reportedly under pressure from Moscow, the Japarov government also banned anti-war protests in Bishkek and levied fines against protesters as of mid-March, although that has not stopped demonstrators from gathering or civil society actors from speaking out," said Stronski. "However, public discussion of Kyrgyzstan's future in Russian-based regional organizations is ongoing."

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, meanwhile, are two Stans that have said almost nothing about the war. The former at the end of February received a visit from Valentina Matviyenko, chair of the Russian Federation Council, who held public and private discussions on the rationale behind Russia's invasion. However, the Tajik government still kept its counsel. Turkmenistan, the remote, tightly controlled `Stan that says little to nothing about world affairs, has upheld its principle of "permanent neutrality," avoiding all public comment on the ***Ukraine*** crisis.

EEU in trouble

Might Russia's economic isolation and the collapse of the ruble even lead to the disintegration of the EEU?

This point is taken up by Olga Gulina, director and founder of the Institute on Migration Policy, a member of the EU-Russia Civil Society Advocacy Group.

"The search and introduction of new export routes from the countries of Eurasia to the West, bypassing Russia, against which Western countries have imposed broad economic sanctions, and the ongoing devaluation of the ruble, and the commission on currency exchange introduced by the Russian government, among other things, can become factors contributing to the collapse of the [EEU]," said Gulina.

"With such a development of events, the Russian ruble will cease to be a liquid currency for trade within the Eurasian Union. Russia will cease to be a country of reception of labour ***migrants***. Most of the 2.4mn citizens from Tajikistan may leave; [and of the] 4.5mn citizens of Uzbekistan; 884,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan; 163 thousand citizens of Kazakhstan; 7 thousand citizens of Turkmenistan; 240,000 citizens of ***Ukraine***; 174,000 citizens of Belarus working in Russia today, all these people, with the exception of citizens of ***Ukraine***, Belarus and Turkmenistan, will be forced to leave Russia and return to their countries of origin," she added.

Serious difficulties, forecast Gulina, will hit Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with 30.1% and 27.8% of their GDP, respectively, consisting of remittances from labour ***migrants***, mainly working in Russia. "Unemployment and demographic pressure in the countries of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, will increase incredibly, which can lead to increased discontent, social protests and political instability in the region. Such internal challenges in the countries of the region, along with the weakening of Russia, will lead to major transformation processes and a drop in interest in any form of integration, including the [EEU]," she concluded.

In mid-March, describing how it was up to "true patriots" to help pull Russia through its difficult times, a belligerent Putin did not mince his words, referring to so-called non-patriotic Russians as "scum and traitors" whom patriots would simply "spit out like an insect in their mouth onto the pavement". Countries that lie in Russia's sphere of influence will be wary of Putin starting to make the same kind of distinction when it comes to Russia's allies.

**Load-Date:** April 5, 2022

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**Pro-war motorcade shocks Berlin**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 5, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 497 words

**Body**

Germany's Russian community organised a mass motorcade in Berlin on April 3 in support of Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine***, shocking residents in the capital, which is admitting thousands of Ukrainian ***refugees*** a day. Although the motorcade took place under the guise of being an anti-Russophobia protest, many accused the group of being pro-war, pointing toward the display of Russian military flags as well as the "Z" symbol which has become synonymous with the invasion.

Video from Twitter account @OB\_Ages Around 900 people in 400 cars drove through the city, from East to West, carrying banners that read "No propaganda in schools", "Stop hatred against Russians", and photos of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Russian "fake-news" laws prohibit criticism of the Russian army or any reference to the invasion as a "war". Instead, it must be referred to as a "special military operation". Moreover, the head of the demonstration placed the Star of David with the inscription "Soon we too?" on his car. The police reportedly intervened, removing the star and questioning individuals displaying the "Z". No arrests were reported and the motorcade was legally organised with a police presence.

Image from Twitter account @Friedenswatch

Shockingly, the route went past Berlin's main railway station, where thousands of Ukrainian ***refugees*** arrive in Berlin on a daily basis. Furthermore, weekly protests against the war organised by the Ukrainian community take place every Sunday. One Ukrainian protester shared a story on social media about how a Russian driver threatened to rape her after she shouted: "Glory to ***Ukraine***".

Image from Twitter account @stadtrandaktion The pro-Russian demonstration received huge criticism online, with many furious at how the state of Berlin allowed it to take place. The Ukrainian ambassador to Germany, Andrij Melnyk, condemned Berlin's mayor on Twitter: "Dear Governing Mayoress Franziska Giffey. For heaven's sake, how could YOU allow this car parade of shame in the middle of Berlin? And on the day that the massacres of civilians in Butscha came to light? HOW???" Other Twitter users called for participants to be deported, accusing them of being a threat to national security.

The drivers also stopped at the Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park, where they reportedly placed flowers and waved USSR flags. There are concerns that a larger or potentially violent demonstration will take place on May 9, when Russians celebrate "Victory Day" over Nazi Germany. Thousands of Russians in Germany participate every year. "This is a foretaste of what will await us on 9 May. We must not tolerate warmongering fascist propaganda here in Berlin - neither today nor at any other time," tweeted Green party member Gollaleh Ahmadi. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated last month that Russia's war in ***Ukraine*** will end on May 9. However, this has been dismissed as Kremlin propaganda to emphasise Russia's accusation that ***Ukraine*** is run by Nazis.

**Load-Date:** April 6, 2022

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**EBRD warns that 2022 results will be 'significantly affected' by Ukraine conflict**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 7, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 553 words

**Body**

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) made a record profit of €2.5bn in 2021 but warned that this year's results would take a significant hit from the impact of Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine***.

"The results demonstrate an all-round strengthening of the balance sheet and put the EBRD on a very firm financial footing," said Soha El-Turky, EBRD chief financial officer.

However, the EBRD said that its 2021 financial performance would be "significantly affected" by its loan and equity exposures to the ***Ukraine*** conflict.

"Increased costs for energy and food as a result of the war, and the potential for higher interest rates, are all likely to have an impact on the economies where the bank operates," it said.

The bank reported that at the end of 2021 it had loans of €2.1bn and equities of €300mn in ***Ukraine***, loans of €200mn and equities of €1.2bn in Russia, and loans of €500mn and equities of €100mn in Belarus.

The EBRD has not carried out any new business in Russia since 2014 or in Belarus since 2021. It announced last month that it was in the process of closing its resident offices in Moscow and Minsk.

The EBRD said that despite the hit to these exposures in ***Ukraine*** and neighbouring countries, it would maintain strong equity and liquidity positions. At the end of 2021, the EBRD had a capital base of €20.3bn.

In March the EBRD announced an initial €2bn economic resilience package for ***Ukraine*** and its neighbouring countries affected by the war. The priorities include trade finance, emergency liquidity, energy security and municipal services.

It said funding will be made rapidly available to support Ukrainian companies, for example, with deferred loans, liquidity support and trade finance, or to allow them to relocate so their work can continue. In addition, the bank will help municipal authorities in countries directly affected by inflows of Ukrainian ***refugees***.

***Ukraine*** is already one of the bank's biggest countries of operations, with cumulative lending of more than €16bn in 511 projects since the EBRD started work, including more than €1bn in 2021.

The multinational development bank's 2021 results were boosted by what the EBRD called the "excellent performance of equity investments across its regions of operations".

Its equity investments recorded a gain of around 30% (€1.7bn) - growing at roughly triple the rate compared with the 2021 benchmark of equity growth in EBRD economies. The bank highlighted the substantial gains in its technology-related investments.

The second factor behind the record results was a reduction in expected credit losses, with the ratio of non-performing loans (NPLs) dropping relative to the 2020 year-end, as economies bounced back from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

At the start of this year the EBRD announced that in 2021 it had reached its second-highest-ever business volume - €10.4bn, only slightly below the record figure achieved in 2020, when EBRD investments were buoyed by emergency lending at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2021, private sector investment rose to 76% of annual business volume and green financing reached 51% (up from 29% in 2020). Last July the EBRD committed to making a majority of its annual investments green by 2025, a target that it met four years ahead of schedule.

**Load-Date:** April 8, 2022

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**Ruble and job losses force Uzbeks to return home from Russia**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 7, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 164 words

**Body**

Some 193,000 labour ***migrants*** returned to Uzbekistan in 1Q22, with 133,000 of them arriving from Russia, according to Azizbek Yunusov, deputy head of the Agency for External Labour Migration. Of the total, 50,000 returned in March alone. For comparison, 502,000 labour ***migrants*** returned to Uzbekistan in all of last year, with Russia accounting for 280,000.

A survey organised by the agency among 15,000 citizens concluded that 15% of the ***migrants*** who returned home decided to do so because they lost their jobs, while 25% said they returned due to exchange rate instability. The heavy depreciation of the ruble since Western powers hit Moscow with swingeing sanctions in response to the Russian invasion of ***Ukraine*** has severely eroded the value of earnings in Russia.

Nearly 24% of respondents in the survey stated that they were not interested in returning to Uzbekistan. They said that they were still gainfully employed but might consider returning should they become unemployed.

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**Shock in Berlin after Soviet War Memorial vandalised**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 8, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 592 words

**Body**

Unknown culprits vandalised the famous Soviet War Memorial in Berlin's Treptower Park on April 7 with painted blood stains and political messages against Russia's war in ***Ukraine***.

Image from Twitter

Messages including "Ukrainian blood on Russian hands" and "Putin = Stalin" were painted on Germany's largest memorial to Red Army soldiers killed in WW2. Specific messages referenced the war crimes committed by Russian troops in Bucha, such as "Russian Culture = Raped Ukrainian Kids".

​

Image from Twitter

The incident comes days after a pro-Russian motorcade horrified Germany's capital on April 3, with displays of Russian military flags and the "Z" symbol which has become synonymous with support for Russia's invasion.

The vandalism received criticism on social media, particularly towards the more vitriolic slogans that include "Death to all Russians" and "Kill Russians".

In retaliation, a demonstration has been organised for April 9 under the banner of standing against Russophobia and anti-Communism.

Zaklin Nastic, a member of the political party Die Linke (The Left), condemned the incident and said "the Bundesregierung (German government) must immediately fulfil its contractual obligations and effectively protect all memorials and people of Russian origin".

Others pointed out the hypocrisy of vandalising a memorial that also serves as a cemetery for 7,000 Red Army soldiers, many of whom were Ukrainian.

One user Tweeted: "In view of the around 13mn Soviet soldiers who died in the liberation of Europe, including those from ***Ukraine***, who immediately put an end to the murders in Auschwitz and other concentration camps, you would do well to show some restraint. Apparently, humility is asking too much".

Another user claimed "such actions are pointless, mainly because it is a SOVIET monument, not a Russian one".

Image from Twitter

​Moreover, pro-Russian accounts have used this as an opportunity to further the Ukrainian/Nazi propaganda, as the memorial represents the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany and features a Soviet soldier crushing a swastika.

"I see Nazi scum desecrated yet another WW2 memorial in Berlin, Treptower Park. Needless to say, zero reaction from the media, the authorities or anyone that matters really. Twenty years of historical revisionism coming home to roost. You do you, Europe," one user wrote.

However, others empathised with the action, although stopped short of commending it.

"It should not be forgotten that the current attack on the memorial site is directed against the exploitation by the fascist Night Wolves (a Russian ultra-nationalist bike gang) and other Z-freaks, who marched there on May 9 and want to transform the site into a sea of Russian flags," one account Tweeted.

Every year, thousands of Russians in Germany commemorate "Victory Day" on May 9, gathering at the Treptower Park War Memorial. In previous years, the ultra-nationalist and Putin-aligned Night Wolves have participated in demonstrations at the monument, causing controversy in Germany.

Since Berlin is home to a large Russian community and an ever-increasing Ukrainian population, including tens of thousands of ***refugees***, there are fears that tensions between Russian and Ukrainian citizens may spill out into violence, particularly on May 9.

"This is a foretaste of what will await us on 9 May. We must not tolerate warmongering fascist propaganda here in Berlin - neither today nor at any other time," tweeted Greens Party member Gollaleh Ahmadi in response to the pro-Russia motorcade.

**Load-Date:** April 11, 2022

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**WORLD BANK: Sanctions set to hobble Russia's economic growth**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 11, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 988 words

**Body**

The following is an extract from the World Bank's Europe and Central Asia Economic Update, "WAR IN THE REGION" economic forecast released on April 10.

The fallout from its invasion of ***Ukraine*** has rapidly overtaken Russia's economic outlook. The strongest set of co-ordinated economic sanctions, swiftly imposed, will severely impact Russia across multiple dimensions. The sanctions amount to co-ordinated shocks to trade, external financing, financial intermediation and confidence.

The withdrawal of many foreign enterprises from the Russian market and a sharply deteriorated outlook will leave Russia bereft of investment, while pressure on households from fast-rising prices and declining incomes will push consumption lower. A deleterious effect on households will, at best, only be partly offset by domestic policy responses.

Looking further ahead, Russia's pre-existing challenge of raising medium-term growth sufficiently to support improved living standards for its population is now far more daunting. Yet given the adverse shock it now faces, this challenge is all the more important.

Recent developments

Before the invasion of ***Ukraine*** and the ensuing sanctions, Russia's economy was recovering well. Growth in 2021 reached 4.7%, following a 2.7% decline in 2020. The general government budget returned to a surplus of 0.8% of GDP. The current account surplus expanded to $120bn - exceeding its 2019 level - as commodity prices increased and outbound tourism remained muted. By the end of 2021, consumer price inflation had become a central concern, reaching 8.4% year-on-year in December. The rise in inflation was broad-based, reflecting a combination of robust demand for goods, increases in energy and food prices, and global supply bottlenecks. The banking sector proved resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic, with economic recovery and credit growth helping to improve balance sheets in 2021. Labour markets strengthened, too, in 2021; the unemployment rate fell to 4.8%, close to its pre-pandemic low.

The official poverty rate of 11.0% by end-2021 was below year-end rates in 2020 and 2019.

However, developments in Russia took a sharp turn for the worse beginning with Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine***. Sanctions imposed on Russia severely restrict access to international capital markets, the capacity to conduct international transactions, the imports of certain goods, and access to international and fiscal reserves.

Several large Russian financial organisations were sanctioned. Sanctions have materially increased risks to banks' asset quality, solvency, funding and liquidity profiles, while limiting the CBR's capacity to absorb shocks.

The imposition of sanctions has led to a precipitous drop in Russian asset prices and the ruble, with the latter depreciating by 30% against major currencies. In response, the Russian authorities doubled interest rates, announced a RUB1 trillion fiscal package, imposed capital controls, and introduced forbearance measures and special regulations for financial markets aimed at stemming the capital flight and easing pressure on the financial system.

Outlook

Uncertainty over the forecasts is unprecedentedly high, conditional on Russia's military actions in ***Ukraine*** and the global response. The severe impacts of sanctions already in place are expected to drive Russia's GDP down by 11.2% in 2022, largely due to a contraction in domestic demand.

High uncertainty, depreciation, disruptions to trade and business closures are expected to result in a 17% slump in investment. A decline in employment and real wages, elevated outmigration and rising costs of living will weigh on private consumption, which is expected to fall by 8.5%. SWIFT and FX restrictions will impede cross-border transactions, leading to delays and cancellations.

Announced bans and reductions in purchases of Russian oil and gas are expected to lead to a substantial fall in shipments this year, while larger slump in non-energy export volumes is also anticipated.

However, the current account balance is expected to strengthen, as the fall in exports will be more than offset by a contraction in imports. High levels of capital outflows are expected from Russia this year. In 2023 and 2024, GDP growth is expected to rebound only gradually, at 0.6 and 1.3% respectively.

Overall, consumer price inflation is expected to rise from 9% in 2021 to 22% in 2022, and to stay well above the central bank target in the projection period.

A decline in economic activity and higher expenditure needs are expected to turn the general government surplus into a substantial deficit in 2022. The adverse impact of the shock on the financial sector makes a major credit crunch likely, while continued pressure on the corporates and banks, combined with eroded buffers, spells a heightened risk of bank failures and systemic crisis in the sector.

Households are expected to be impacted by the crisis via four channels - limited access to goods and services (either because of inflation, shortages or even rationing), falling labour incomes, asset price falls, and ***migrant*** workers likely to be especially affected via falling remittances.

The percentage of the population with incomes below the official poverty line (approximately $14 per day) is projected to increase to 12.8% in 2022 from 11.0% in 2021 (an increase of 2.6mn people). The poverty rate using the World Bank poverty line ($5.5 per day) is expected to increase from 2.0 in 2021 to 2.8% in 2022 (an increase of above 1mn people) and practically remain there through 2024.

Risks are skewed to the downside, as additional rounds of sanctions could further impact Russia's outlook. A disruption in oil or gas receipts, or more severe dysfunction in domestic financial markets, could push growth lower and poverty rates up. Still-low COVID-19 vaccination rates and the prospect of new variants remains another source of risk.

**Load-Date:** April 12, 2022

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**Tajikistan authorities dither as remittance plunge looms**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 11, 2022 Monday

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**Length:** 1151 words

**Body**

Tajikistan says it has a plan to get out of the looming economic crisis provoked by the war in ***Ukraine***. The only problem is that barely anybody knows what's in it.

The pain that is coming will be the result of the certain drop in the volume of remittances from Russia, where many hundreds of thousands of Tajik seasonal ***migrants*** live and work.

A nervous population can do nothing but keep a close eye on the erratic developments of Russia's imperilled economy.

"This has become the rule in Tajikistan: When the Russian ruble depreciates, prices for food go up on the very same day," said 41-year-old Dushanbe resident Guljahon, who spoke to Eurasianet on condition of anonymity.

This fresh crisis threatens to push yet more Tajiks beyond the threshold between scant comfort and total penury.

In 2020, Guljahon's husband, who has had jobs as a labourer on building sites, was unable to go to Russia because of the COVID-19 pandemic. To keep the food coming for them and their three children, the family sold items of furniture and home appliances.

Flights between Russia and Tajikistan only resumed in earnest in the autumn of 2021. The construction season in Russia typically picks up in spring, when the weather improves, so Guljahon's husband headed out in March. That was when a turbulence sparked in Russia by the international sanctions regime began to take its toll.

"We thought we could start spreading our wings, but then the crisis began again," Guljahon said.

Sustained interventions by the Russian Central Bank have helped the ruble regain its losses since the start of the ***Ukraine*** war, which is good news for Tajik workers, since that has restored some health to the state of their incomes.

But the artificially maintained level of the ruble will do little to preserve the health of the labour market. Some early signs are worrying.

The Labour, Migration and Employment Ministry on April 8 revealed that 60,000 Tajik nationals had returned to their home country from Russia in the first three months of this year. It is normal for people to return home throughout the year since labour is highly seasonal, but that figure is 2.6 times higher than what was seen in the same period in 2021. The caveat is that the COVID-19 interlude has severely disrupted the normal ebb and flow of movements, making these data more ambivalent and complicated to interpret.

Nevertheless, regardless of whether more or less Tajik ***migrants*** go to Russia, jobs will be fewer and salaries will be lower.

Russian business newspaper RBK last month cited VEB.RF, a state-run national economic development institution, as forecasting a 12% fall in disposable incomes for Russians in 2022. For the country's weakest earners - its ***migrants*** - things could be much worse.

And if remittances start dwindling drastically, spending power in Tajikistan will tumble. Staples like meat, rice and carrots may become even rarer sights on the tables of the poor before long.

Prices have already gone up. Since the ***Ukraine*** war began, prices for food goods have increased by between 7% and 15%.

The government has for now in the main stuck to burying its head in the sand. Officials have barely acknowledged that there is a problem at all. This is in large part a feature of the deeply authoritarian and personalistic political system. Acknowledging a crisis could be read as tantamount to criticising the wisdom of government policy - and the leadership of President Emomali Rahmon more specifically.

That said, Rahmon has conceded that not all is well. In a speech marking the start to the holy month of Ramadan, he alluded to a looming period of unpredictability.

"This year will be the most difficult and complicated for humanity in every respect, particularly when it comes to food security," he said on April 1.

He did not address anything his government intends to do to mitigate this hardship, however. He instead instructed the public to stockpile two years' worth of food.

"We must not forget the hardships and suffering that our people endured during the years of the civil war [in the 1990s] because of the lack of bread. And so, I want to emphasise once again that every family should think about how to provide for themselves, how to produce as many goods as possible and stock up on the food they need for the coming two years," the president said.

Rahmon did trail some band-aids, though. One was a moratorium on government inspections on businesses until the end of 2022.

Spot audits are typically a favoured way of keeping the cogs of corruption whirring. Enterprises operate at the mercy of a whole range of state inspectors, ranging from tax officials to health and safety standards monitors, who it is said will accept a bribe to turn a blind eye to irregularities.

The Economic Development and Trade Ministry, meanwhile, does have an anti-crisis plan. At least it says that it does.

When Dushanbe-based outlet Asia-Plus contacted the ministry for details, it was told that the plan envisioned measures to contain inflation, support for vulnerable segments of the population, labour ***migrants*** and entrepreneurs, and commitments to keep salaries and pensions rolling in for state employees and retirees.

What the ministry did not provide was any specifics about how it intends to achieve any of those aims.

Sadriddin Shamsiddinov, a Dushanbe-based economics affairs expert who would only speak to Eurasianet if he was identified by a pseudonym, said this plan was little more than a reprisal of the many other similar nominal anti-crisis plans that the government has announced in previous years. Their intent, he said, was merely to give the misleading impression that officials were doing something.

"Over the past 10 years, this is at least the third plan we're hearing about. But in reality, these plans don't do anything," he said.

Plans should have specific points to implement, deadlines, and responsible personnel who can be held to account, but none of that is present here, Shamsiddinov said.

"As a rule, responsibility for implementation of the plan is impersonal. Or there might be a specific person [in charge], but we do not know who it is, and if the plan fails, no one will be held to account for it. We do not have a single report summing up what work was done on implementing previous plans," Shamsiddinov said.

Abdumanon Sheraliyev, a Tajik economic affairs commentator based in Europe, argues that the Tajik people will, as is now customary, have to fall back on their own resources and expect nothing from the government.

"Even if [the government] somehow reacted, they could hardly do anything to prevent this crisis, which may become the worst to hit since the days of independence," Sheraliyev said. "It takes years to prepare for such crises, by implementing really serious state programmes, but our authorities have never had one of those."

**Load-Date:** April 11, 2022

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**Polish-led fundraiser sees over €9bn in pledges for Ukrainian refugees**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 12, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 227 words

**Body**

A global fundraising event in Warsaw resulted in donors pledging €9.1bn in support for Ukrainian ***refugees*** on April 9.

The "Stand Up for ***Ukraine***" campaign culminated in Warsaw with the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen attending as co-host with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

***Ukraine*** President Volodymyr Zelensky also joined via video link.

"***Ukraine***'s bravery united the whole of democratic world," said Zelensky. He reiterated his call on Western allies to impose an embargo on imports of Russian energy commodities and bar Moscow from accessing financial markets.

Zelensky also asked for more arms, as ***Ukraine*** is readying for what appears an imminent Russian offensive in the eastern regions of the country.

The campaign raised €1.8bn in support for internally displaced people in ***Ukraine***. Another €7.3bn has been raised for those who have fled from the war to neighbouring states.

An estimated 4.1mn Ukrainians have left their homeland since Russia's attack on February 24. Nearly 2.7mn have crossed into Poland, presenting the country with an unprecedented social and economic challenge.

Of the raised amount, €5bn will come from the EU's financial institutions. The remaining €4.1bn has been pledged by governments, companies and individuals and will be distributed by the Ukrainian authorities or the United Nations.

**Load-Date:** April 12, 2022

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**Warsaw plans to house Ukrainian refugees in former Russian 'spy town'**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 12, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 315 words

**Body**

A bailiff working for the Warsaw town hall took over a building once used by the Russian embassy to house diplomats, it emerged on April 11.

The huge residential complex, built in the late 1970s and nicknamed "Szpiegowo" ("Spy town"), has stood empty since the collapse of the Soviet Union with Russia refusing to hand it over.

Poland terminated the building's lease contract in 2008 and has been issuing the Russia embassy invoices for rent since - which the Russian side never paid.

Warsaw authorities now hope to renovate the complex and use it to help Ukrainian ***refugees*** in the capital. Since the war broke out on February 24, Warsaw, a city of 1.7mn, has welcomed around 300,000 Ukrainian fleeing war in their home country.

"In view of the Russian aggression against ***Ukraine***, I decided to arrange apartments there for the needs of Ukrainian families with children," Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski said on Twitter in March when paperwork to carry out the official takeover of the building was still underway.

"I submitted a note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressing interest in the long-term lease of this building. It will definitely serve ***Ukraine*** and Ukrainians. Maybe there will be a school, maybe a kindergarten, maybe apartments," ***Ukraine***'s Ambassador to Poland Andriy Deshchytsia, who was present at the takeover, said.

It was not clear, however, if the long-disused building was even suitable for carrying out renovation or if it would be cheaper to demolish it and re-develop the land from scratch.

But any work in the building will be made extra complicated since it is in the registry of historic buildings as an example of post-war modernist architecture.

The Russian embassy in Poland said that the takeover of the building meant that it was now "occupied" by Poland.

Poland's ministry of foreign affairs said that it was "pleased" with the takeover.

**Load-Date:** April 12, 2022

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**Pro-Russia motorcade pelted with horse manure in Hanover**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 12, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 497 words

**Body**

A pro-Russian motorcade was pelted with horse manure in Hanover, Germany, on April 10, after facing a backlash from thousands of counter-protesters.

Image from Twitter - Moritz Simon

The motorcade was held under the guise of standing against Russophobia with around 350 vehicles taking part, according to police reports. The route was allegedly kept secret from the public after a similar motorcade in Berlin the week before caused a massive backlash and condemnation from German politicians.

In response, around 3,500 protesters displaying Ukrainian flags held counter-demonstrations and sit-ins, blocking the route of the motorcade and forcing the police to redirect the cars.

At one point, a group of counter-protesters surrounded a car displaying a Russian flag and pelted it with horse manure, according to journalist Leon Enrique Montero.

The Russian demonstrators carried banners with signs that read "We are against discrimination" and "Russia and Germany mutual respect and support", alongside the Russian flag and German flag. There was also a noticeable display of Kazakh flags as well.

Video from Twitter - Reinhard Bingener

Unlike the protest in Berlin on April 3, the Hanover motorcade was less overtly about support for the war. Russian military flags and the `Z' symbol, associated with support for the invasion of ***Ukraine***, were not visible.

"The 'Z' has become a symbol of an authoritarian regime, which is conducting a terrible war of aggression, breaking international law, gagging freedom of expression and making lies the norm," tweeted SPD MP Michael Roth on March 28. It was announced last month that Germany will prosecute people displaying the `Z'.

Nevertheless, the demonstrations have been interpreted as an exhibition of support for Russia's war in ***Ukraine***.

Another pro-Russian demo was held in Frankfurt am Main with hundreds of attendees. A flag for the Border Force of Russia was spotted.

Reacting to the event, Anders Östlund, a fellow at the Centre for European Policy Analysis, tweeted: "It's not just Putin. Here are people living in a free society, with access to free media, who are supporting the atrocities Russia is committing in ***Ukraine***."

The demonstrations were the latest in a series of increasing tensions between the large Russian population in Germany and the new influx of Ukrainian ***refugees***, as well as pro-Ukrainian supporters.

Last week, the Soviet War Memorial in Berlin was vandalised with messages that included "Putin = Stalin" and "Death to all Russians".

Russians make up the third-largest ethnic group in Germany and there are concerns over the May 9 Victory Day celebrations in which thousands of Russians in Germany take part in public gatherings.

"This is a foretaste of what will await us on 9 May. We must not tolerate warmongering fascist propaganda here in Berlin - neither today nor at any other time," tweeted Greens Party member Gollaleh Ahmadi in response to the pro-Russia motorcade on April 3.

**Load-Date:** April 13, 2022

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**Ukraine's economy to contract by 35% in 2022 - IIF**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 15, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 1468 words

**Body**

***Ukraine***'s economy will contract by 35% this year as a result of the war with Russia, the Institute of International Finance (IIF) said in a note released on April 13.

"We expect Ukrainian real GDP to contract by more than 35% in 2022 under the assumption that the conflict will largely remain contained to the east of the country in 2022H2," said Elina Ribakova, deputy chief economist with IIF, and economist Benjamin Hilgenstock in a paper. "As a result of the severe drop in economic activity as well as war-related tax cuts and additional expenditures for the military campaign, we expect government revenue to fall by roughly 50%, resulting in a fiscal gap of $3-10bn per month. Thus the international community's commitments of $6bn to date will certainly fall short."

IIF's estimates differ slightly from the recently released World Bank estimate that ***Ukraine***'s economy will shrink by 45% this year as a result of the conflict, while Russia's economy will contract by 11.2%. The estimate of the amount of funding Kyiv has received is also slightly different from the other reports that the total promised is some $25bn, but $7bn has actually arrived so far.

***Ukraine***'s GDP could collapse to one third of what it was pre-war, International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director Kristalina Georgieva said on March 22. ***Ukraine***'s Ministry of Finance currently anticipates GDP to contract by as much as 40%.

The impact of the ongoing military confrontation gets worse by the day. The cost of the war is now $600bn, according to an updated estimate by Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) released on April 12, up from its previous estimate of $565bn at the end of March. The damage being done to ***Ukraine*** is rising by approximately $6bn a week, according to these estimates. To put that in context, ***Ukraine***'s previous standby agreement (SBA) with the IMF was for $5bn to be released over 18 months to pay for the necessary reforms.

While donor money is probably enough to keep ***Ukraine***'s wartime economy functioning for the meantime, there will be problems with ***Ukraine***'s external financing picture, which had been relatively benign in the recent past, warns IIF.

"Reserves of the National Bank of ***Ukraine*** (NBU) have remained broadly stable since late February; however, we worry that exports may stay subdued for a considerable amount of time - as ports are closed and railroad/road infrastructure is used for other purposes - while imports pick up," Ribakova and Hilgenstock say.

Russia has destroyed Mariupol, one of ***Ukraine***'s major ports. In addition, Russia controls the Kerch Strait, which prevents any Ukrainian shipping from leaving the Sea of Azov, where Mariupol is. In addition, the Black Sea port of Odesa remains in government hands, but all shipping in and out of it is blockaded. As a result, ***Ukraine***'s exports of grain, coal and metal have collapsed.

In March, exports fell by 50% month on month to $2.7bn (from $5.3bn in February) and imports by 70% to $1.8bn (from $5.9bn in February), according to the Ministry of Economy. Exports are likely to remain significantly subdued, while imports may pick up again in the coming months.

"The economic impact of the war will be dramatic, even though the magnitude is set to remain unclear for some time," Ribakova and Hilgenstock say. "The destruction of physical capital plays an important role; the Kyiv School of Economics estimates that such damage has already reached at least $80bn in only six weeks of war (and overall losses of $564-600bn)."

IIF points out that the displacement of labour will also weigh on the economic recovery. Some 7.1mn people have been internally displaced and another 4.5mn have left the country, with half going to Poland, according to the latest UN reports. That comes on top of the exodus of workers in recent years, driven abroad by much higher wages in neighbouring countries. ***Ukraine*** was already suffering a labour shortage before the war broke out, with an estimated 20% of its entire workforce working overseas, mostly in Poland.

To estimate the war's impact on real GDP, IIF has developed scenarios by distinguishing between three types of regions within the country:

(1) regions with isolated attacks;

(2) regions that were part of the initial invasion but have since been reclaimed; and

(3) regions that will be experiencing prolonged conflict.

"In our baseline scenario, we assume that output will decline by 20%, 40% and 80% respectively, resulting in a more than 35% drop for the country in 2022," Ribakova and Hilgenstock say. "While we find this scenario appealing due to its simplicity, we also present a range of alternative scenarios. The risk is likely to rise, as the war may escalate further."

The key near-term challenge is budget financing. As bne IntelliNews has reported, the government has seen tax collection collapse as an estimated 30% of companies have stopped working altogether and another 45% have reduced their output, according to a survey by the NBU in March.

"Authorities currently estimate a monthly financing gap of at least $3bn, with the higher end of the range of possible outcomes at $10bn. The key driver is lower revenues, which could fall by at least 50% in 2022 due to the sharp GDP contraction and a number of war-related measures," Ribakova and Hilgenstock say.

***Ukraine*** will see an increase in the state budget deficit of ***Ukraine*** from $2.7bn in March to $5-7bn in April and May per month, Finance Minister Serhiy Marchenko predicted on 12 April, the Financial Times reported.

"We are in a state of great stress, in the worst condition. This is a matter of our country's survival," the minister said. "If you want us to continue to fight in this war, to win this war... so help us," Marchenko added. The minister has urged the international community to come to ***Ukraine***'s financial aid.

The government has also reduced its income by offering wartime tax breaks to allow companies to continue to function. Among them are tax breaks recently introduced in the Rada, including a temporary removal of VAT and other duties on imports as well as corporate income taxes for SMEs. The suspension of VAT in particular will dramatically reduce the tax take, as it accounts for a third of tax revenues by itself. In addition, the parliament is considering suspending the excise tax and reducing the VAT on fuel, IIF reports.

"Should the war continue for months, which is more likely than not at this point, tough choices will need to be made on fiscal spending. Even under the most optimistic assumption of a $3bn financing gap per month, currently committed external funding would only last until the end of April," Ribakova and Hilgenstock say, reinforcing Marchanko's prediction that the deficit could double in the coming months.

As ***Ukraine*** went into the war with some $28bn in reserves, or over four months of import cover, a comfortable level, it has been able to service its debt obligations so far. There is another $4bn to pay on principal sovereign borrowing in the rest of this year, which the state should be able to cover without too much difficulty.

"Nonetheless, we are worried about a growing external financing gap. Financial account outflows accelerated sharply in February, to $1.9bn, partly due to ***refugees***' withdrawals abroad," Ribakova and Hilgenstock say. "Since then, the NBU has introduced restrictions, but they may not be sufficient... With ongoing financial account outflows, this would result in an increasing financing gap."

IIF also highlighted the impact the war in ***Ukraine*** will have on global food security. Food prices have already soared, as bne IntelliNews reported in a deep dive into the global grain trade.

***Ukraine*** remains one of the key exporters of important staple foods, including barley, maize, vegetable oils and wheat. The war poses an immediate risk to the 2022 harvest, as the country could miss the sowing season, which should already have started, IIF reports.

In addition, seaports, which account for around 80% of total cargo, will likely remain closed in the coming months (and naval mines could present a threat even after the war), and railways are largely used for other purposes.

Finally, authorities have restricted exports of critical items such as barley, beef, buckwheat, rye, salt and sugar, while many other products now require licensing, IIF reports.

"The ***Ukraine*** crisis' geopolitical ripple effects also weigh on Russian exports, and we expect the situation to be most challenging for countries in MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa," Ribakova and Hilgenstock say. "Non-food commodities, among them energy and metals, have seen significant price increases in recent months as well. These appear to be somewhat correlated with the role that Belarus, Russia and ***Ukraine*** play in total world imports."

**Load-Date:** April 15, 2022

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**Ukraine's Kuleba visits Sofia, thanks Bulgaria for helping refugees**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 19, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 372 words

**Body**

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitro Kuleba has arrived in Bulgaria to meet top political officials in an attempt to find more support for his country during the Russian invasion, and thanked Sofia for the help extended to thousands ***refugees*** are staying in the country during the first day of his visit on April 19.

The visit was not previously announced and late on April 18 local media reported that Kuleba had entered the country by car with his schedule being unknown.

"Met my Bulgarian counterpart Teodora Genchovska in Sofia today. Grateful to the people of Bulgaria for embracing Ukrainians fleeing Russian aggression. We discussed further steps to restore peace in ***Ukraine***, strengthen bilateral cooperation, and advance ***Ukraine***'s EU membership," Kuleba wrote on Twitter.

Although widely expected, he did not mention any talks with the Bulgarian authorities on providing military aid to ***Ukraine***. Kuleba also met Prime Minister Kiril Petkov who is keen to back ***Ukraine*** but his attempts are being blocked by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which is member of the ruling coalition.

"Building on their active dialogue with President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, Prime Minister Kiril Petkov received me in Sofia. I thanked him for hosting Ukrainian ***refugees*** and for Bulgaria's steadfast political support within the EU," Kuleba wrote.

In an official statement, Petkov noted that Bulgaria will keep strongly supporting ***Ukraine*** and that the two have discussed in private the situation in ***Ukraine***.

Kuleba is to meet also Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev. However, this visit is also unlikely to secure ***Ukraine*** the much-desired military aid.

Addressing the media following his meeting with Genchovska, Kuleba said that Russia today does not deserve sympathy.

"I am aware of the role of Russia in the Bulgarian history, maybe you know the role of Russia in our history - there are things that leave emotions in people's minds. Russia, with which we are dealing at the moment, is something different - this is Russia that kills, destroys, tortures, rapes. This is not that Russia which deserves sympathy and understanding," Kuleba said.

He added that ***Ukraine*** is fighting not only for its freedom but also for the safety of Bulgaria.

**Load-Date:** April 20, 2022

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**The battle of the Donbas has begun**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 19, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 1687 words

**Body**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy says Russia's widely anticipated battle of the Donbas in eastern ***Ukraine*** has begun, as reports of heavy fighting and a Russian assault rolled in the evening of April 18.

Zelenskiy said a "significant part" of the Russian army was now poised to try to take control of eastern regions in ***Ukraine***. In a video address he said Russian troops had begun the battle for Donbas, "for which they have been preparing for a long time... No matter how many Russian troops are driven there, we will fight. We will defend ourselves. We will do it every day."

On the same day the steel works in the southern port town of Mariupol was struck and that has been the last hold-out of Ukrainian defenders. The Ukrainian fighters there refused a Russian ultimatum the previous day and vowed to "fight to the last drop of blood."

The western city of Lviv was also struck by four cruise missiles and saw its first civilian deaths. The city, which is close to the Polish border, has been a major staging post for both military and civilian aid flowing into the country since the conflict began over 50 days ago.

Zelenskiy in his daily video address repeated his call for more heavy weapons, describing "every delay" as "permission for Russia to take the lives of Ukrainians". In his latest address, he appealed to countries to send arms, and indirectly criticised Germany, by adding that some countries had been "holding back," and that ***Ukraine***'s fate "depends upon them".

Russia has moved 11 new battalion tactical groups into the east and south of ***Ukraine*** in recent days, preparing heavy artillery, aviation and other military assets, and has directed more troops into the region. Russia has spent more than three weeks pulling troops away from Kyiv to bolster the ranks poised to attack eastern cities. Moscow has also brought fresh forces from Belarus to focus on the eastern front, according to US intelligence reports, as the Russian military is now concentrated on taking control of the Donbas as part of its Phase 2 of its operation.

The first heavy weapons from the latest $800mn package promised by the US arrived in the last days in ***Ukraine*** and will be thrown into the fight, but Kyiv is keeping up maximum pressure on the West as it faces the prospect of a major set-piece military battle, where it will confront the Russian army head on rather than in skirmishes and urban warfare, where the local defenders have the advantage.

The Russian troops around Kyiv have withdrawn back into Belarus, but they have been replaced by fresh Spetsnaz troops, according to reports.

There were also reports of the deployment of fighter jets and bombers attacking parts of Donbas on April 18. Until now Russia has not made full use of its superior airpower and has relied more on shelling and cruise missiles to hit infrastructure, military and, increasingly, residential targets. Cities like Mariupol have been flattened Russia artillery, whereas other less strategically important cities have been hit by targeted and selective missile attacks to create an atmosphere of terror across the entire country.

Peace talks hit an impasse

There was some optimism that a ceasefire deal could be reached after the Ukrainians issued a ten-point list of peace proposals on March 29 in Istanbul that contained several compromises. But the talks seem to have ground to a halt in the last week as each side hardened their position.

Zelenskiy reaffirmed last week that ***Ukraine*** will not compromise on its territorial integrity, whereas earlier he suggested that he was prepared to put the issue of deciding the fate of Crimea and the Donbas off in order to conclude a ceasefire and floated the option of holding a country-wide referendum on their status at some point in the future.

Previously the peace talk teams agreed to put aside the thorny question of territorial status of the disputed regions for a later face-to-face meeting between Putin and Zelenskiy and concentrated on other points where there was common ground. However, many analysts believe that the Kremlin is not prepared to concede on any of its positions and that its demands were simply ultimatums. Having rejected Kyiv's offers of compromises, the Kremlin is now following through with Russia's step-by-step strategy of simply escalating the violence at each stage until Kyiv eventually caves in.

Mariupol

The change in pace was also visible in the battle for Mariupol, which has been under heavy Russian bombardment for almost a month. Video footage shared on social media appeared to show a large missile or bomber attack on the steel mill where Ukrainian defenders have been holding out, desperately fighting against Russian forces, surrounded and outnumbered, unable to resupply or get their wounded out.

Russian forces set an ultimatum for the defending Ukrainian forces held up in the Azovstal metal works to surrender by 6am on April 17, and they would be given safe passage if they did, but they refused to do so.

In his evening address on April 16 Zelenskiy described the situation in Mariupol as "inhuman" and accused Russia of "deliberately trying to destroy everyone" there.

Moscow has been trying to take the strategically important port city that would link Russia's mainland with Crimea via a "land bridge", but has faced fierce resistance from local defenders, including many from the right-wing Azov forces. The Russian forces have been unable to oust the defenders from the steel mill on the outskirts of the city. There are reportedly more than 100,000 civilians trapped in the city.

Zelenskiy told Ukrayinska Pravda that the situation was "very difficult" in Mariupol. "Our soldiers are blocked; the wounded are blocked. There is a humanitarian crisis ... Nevertheless, the guys are defending themselves."

"I am Serhiy Volyna, Commander of the 36th Separate Marine Brigade named after Rear Admiral Mykhailo Belinsky, am addressing to you from the besieged Mariupol. We will not give up and will fight to the end," the leader of the defence forces tweeted earlier in the day posting a photo of himself together with Zelenskiy.

The Russian forces have been unable to dislodge the 36th Separate Marine Brigade force. Unconfirmed reports alleged that Russia used chemical weapons during the previous week, but the Brigade has successfully resisted all attempts to dislodge them. The mayor of Kyiv has already renamed one of the squares in the capital "Heroes of Mariupol."

"But our loyalty to the oath was not enough to liberate Mariupol. We need heavy weapons. It is in the power of the EU and the US to provide it to us. Heavy weapons for the defenders of Mariupol will save the Ukrainian military group," Volyna continued. "Mariupol can be saved. We are ready to fight to the last drop of blood. But we must know that the world has done everything possible for this. Then we are ready to do even the impossible for our country. 18.04.2022. Serhiy Volyna."

Volyna earlier posted a picture of himself and a letter he wrote to the Pope asking him to intercede on ***Ukraine***'s behalf. Some analysts ascribed the strike on Lviv as revenge for the extremely embarrassing sinking of the Black Sea flagship cruiser Moskva at the weekend, a major blow to Moscow's prestige that has caused outrage in Russia.

Lviv first civilian deaths

The previously relatively calm western city of Lviv also came under bombardment at 8am on the same day and saw its first civilian deaths. Four cruise missiles struck the city and shattered the peace there, as life had slowly been getting back to normal.

Three military installations were hit as well as a workshop in the centre, where at least four civilians were killed according to reports. Initial reports say the missiles came from the east and possibly from the Caspian Sea.

Lviv has been playing a vital role as a logistical hub for both humanitarian and military aid from the West.

In a rare statement the Russian Defence Ministry said an estimated 23,000 Ukrainians were dead and released their names. Zelenskiy earlier claimed that 3,000 Ukrainian soldiers had died.

Russia says that under 2,000 of their troops have died, whereas the Ukrainian intelligence says around 20,000 Russian soldiers have died and independent experts estimate the Russian deaths at somewhere around 15,000.

The United Nations ***refugee*** agency said 4,869,019 Ukrainians had left the country since Russia invaded in February as of April 18 - up 32,574 from the April 17 total, the UN High Commissioner for ***Refugees*** chief, Filippo Grandi, said as reported in the Guardian.

The US administration is watching events closely and a senior advisor to US President Joe Biden said that the US was contemplating entering the fray, and might commit troops to the fighting.

The talk has turned to a possible tactical nuclear strike against Kyiv. Washington has said that use of nuclear weapons would be a game-changer, but analysts say that a small 1 kilo tonne nuclear warhead used against Kyiv would decimate about one kilometre radius of the capital, but would probably not provoke a Nato response, as the West doesn't possess such small tactical nuclear weapons and a retaliation with larger nuclear weapons would rapidly escalate into a full-scale nuclear exchange.

In happier news on the same day as the battle for Donbas started, Matti Maasikas, the Ambassador of the European Union to ***Ukraine***, accepted answers to a questionnaire from the European Commission that will kick off ***Ukraine***'s application to join the EU, which was submitted only ten days earlier. Zelenskiy has been hounding the EU for a concrete date when the country could begin the formal process of joining the European trade club but had been met with a stony silence. The silver lining of the current conflict is that the EU may overcome its hesitancy and allow the ***Ukraine*** to join the EU - the only really successful reform programme for any of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) states and which has transformed the economies and dramatically lifted the standard of living of citizens of any country that has successfully joined the club.

**Load-Date:** April 19, 2022

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**Russia declares famous YouTuber Yuri Dud `foreign agent'**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 20, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 430 words

**Body**

The Russian Justice Ministry's ever-growing list of so-called `foreign agents' expanded once again last Friday, this time adding nine people, including one of the country's most popular YouTubers, Yury Dud.

The decision to add more people to the list is Russia's latest step in its crackdown against free media, this time targeting a well-respected blogger and documentary maker. Dud joins over 100 other prominent figures, including the rapper Face and members of the feminist punk-rock collective Pussy Riot. The designation essentially makes it impossible to work inside Russia, as companies risk backlash for collaborating with a so-called foreign agent.

Dud, a long time critic of the Kremlin, has become a household name in recent years and is one of a handful of online stars to translate their celebrity into the mainstream.

Discussions with the likes of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, exiled oligarch Mikhail Kordokhovsky and controversial socialite Kseniya Sobchak - all of which garnered more than 17 million views - have thrust Dud into the limelight, enabling him to snag parts in numerous advertising campaigns for the likes of Alfa Bank and Head & Shoulders.

However, with his latest antiwar statements, Dud appears to have caused the government to lose its patience with the country's most respected influencer.

Writing on Instagram on February 22, two days before President Vladimir Putin declared war on ***Ukraine***, Dud openly criticised the seemingly inevitable decision, and call his post  "written proof" that he can show his kids in the future that he "did not choose this regime and did not support its imperialist rage."

In the two months since, Dud has repeatedly spoken against the war and interviewed a Russian couple in Hungary helping Ukrainian ***refugees***. The video now has 6 million views.

Despite being openly against numerous government decisions, Dud had essentially been tolerated for several years. In 2019, he used a speech at the GQ Man of the Year wards in Moscow to ask the star-stuffed crowd to speak up about political repression and election fraud. Two years later, in January 2021, he came against the jailing of Alexey Navalny, calling it "lawlessness".

While the authorities have allowed Dud to voice dissent for a few years, opposition to the invasion of ***Ukraine*** is seen as a red line, and far more significant than supporting an opposition figure. In today's Russia, where nobody can oppose the war without backlash, it is increasingly clear that anyone with any shred of influence will be targeted for any form of dissent.

**Load-Date:** April 20, 2022

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**Czech police investigating war crimes in Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 20, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 154 words

**Body**

Czech police from the national organised crime unit started gathering testimonies from Ukrainian ***refugees*** currently residing in the country on possible war crimes committed in ***Ukraine***, according to a statement of the supreme state prosecutor.

"The subject of the investigation are acts which, according to the initial information, show features of war crimes, which are also defined by the international law regulating the methods and means of warfare or other armed conflicts, i.e. in particular show the characteristics of waging war in violation of the Hague and Geneva Conventions," a statement read.

"The prerequisite for securing sufficient evidence is the willingness of the ***refugees*** to cooperate with the Czech authorities," explained the supreme state prosecutor Lenka Bradacova, adding that the investigation is not yet in the stage where specific persons could be prosecuted.  An information campaign will follow.

**Load-Date:** April 20, 2022

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**Biden announces yet another $800mn military aid package for Ukraine that will arrive in Kyiv by the weekend**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 21, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 1339 words

**Body**

US President Joe Biden announced he was authorising an eighth $800mn military aid package, only a week after signing off on a similar $800mn package, as ***Ukraine*** prepares for the Battle of Donbas that is expected to start in earnest any day now.

"We will never fail in our efforts to defend freedom and oppose tyranny," Biden said during a press conference in the White House Roosevelt Room on April 21.

According to a Pentagon readout, the new $800mn military aid package to ***Ukraine*** includes:

· 72 155mm Howitzers and 144,000 artillery rounds;

· 72 Tactical Vehicles to tow 155mm Howitzers;

· Over 121 Phoenix Ghost tactical drones; and

· Field equipment and spare parts.

The senior US Defence official said the drones had been "rapidly developed specifically by the US Air Force to meet Ukrainian requirements," CNBC reported.

"It provides similar capabilities to the switchblade series of unmanned systems, similar capabilities but not exact. There are other differences in the scope of capability for the Phoenix Ghosts, but I'm just not going to be able to get into more detail about those capabilities right now," the official told the US broadcaster.

Biden added that not all the US assistance to ***Ukraine*** was being advertised.

The announcement of more heavy weapons will be welcomed in Kyiv. During his nightly video address the day before, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said: "I am very pleased to say, with cautious optimism, that our partners started to understand our needs better ... And when exactly we need this. Not in weeks, not in a month, but immediately. Right now, as Russia is trying to intensify its attacks."

"The situation in the east and south of our country remains as severe as possible. The occupiers do not give up trying to gain at least some victory for themselves through a large-scale offensive. At least something they can 'feed' their propagandists with," Zelenskiy added.

"We will do everything we can to bring to justice every Russian troop and commander guilty of war crimes. Every surname, every home address, every bank account - we will find everything," Zelenskiy said.

US will send first flights of military aid from Biden's $800mn package to ***Ukraine*** within 24 hours; weapons should be in Ukrainian hands by the weekend, a senior US defence official told journalists at the briefing.

"Sometimes we will speak softly and carry a large Javelin, because we're sending a lot of those in as well," Biden said, referring to the hand-held "tank-busting" Javelin missiles.

Biden also said that he has used up his presidential weapons for conflict allocations and was sending a new weapons allocation request for ***Ukraine*** to Congress shortly that he hopes will be quickly approved.

The latest military package brings the total spent under Biden's presidency to about $4bn, of which $3.4bn has been allocated since Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded ***Ukraine*** on February 24. Nearly half of that total - $1.6bn - has been approved in the last two weeks alone.

In addition to the $800mn of military aid, Biden said that he had also approved another $500mn of economic assistance to ***Ukraine*** to shore up the government's finances, bringing the total economic aid granted to the ***Ukraine*** to $1bn since the war started.

"This is money the government can help use to stabilise their economy, to support communities that have been devastated by the Russian onslaught and pay the brave workers that continue to provide essential services to the people of ***Ukraine***," Biden said.

Biden said he had discussed the new assistance package in person with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, who is on a visit to the White House on the same day. Zelenskiy thanked the US via a tweet.

"This help is needed today more than ever! It saves the lives of our defenders of democracy and freedom and brings us closer to restoring peace in ***Ukraine***," Zelenskiy wrote in his tweet.

Answering questions from the press, Biden said the US has the military capacity to support ***Ukraine*** for "a long time." He said the most important factor for the West is "maintaining unity" on sanctions and economic isolation of Russia and that Putin has "failed" in Russia's "grand ambitions" on the battlefield in ***Ukraine***.

"Putin is banking on us losing interest," Biden said. "He's betting Western unity will crack. It's not going to happen."

Mariupol

The situation in ***Ukraine*** on the ground remains very tense. Military deployment maps show that almost all the country is now free of Russian troops. Reports from Kyiv say that the Ukrainian army is now back in complete control of the ***Ukraine***-Belarus northern border and the troops around Kyiv are gone.

The Russian forces are now entirely concentrated in the south and east along the land bridge that connects Crimea to Donbas and north of the disputed regions to Kharkiv in the middle of the Russian-Ukrainian border.

There is still intense fighting at the Azovstal metal works in Mariupol, where the hold-out defenders have defied two Russian ultimatums to surrender and save their lives and the 1,000 civilians - mostly women and children - that are also sheltering in the basements of the metal works.

During the afternoon of April 21 Putin cancelled plans to storm the Azovstal steel plant and is content for his forces to maintain the siege while taking control of the rest of the city.

"There is no need to climb into these catacombs," he says at a meeting with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, who had reported died last week from a massive heart attack. Putin hailed the Russia's "liberation" of Mariupol as the Russian army has all but destroyed the city during a two-month siege.

However, Putin told Shoigu to block off the Azovstal metallurgical plant, where the last Ukrainian troops are holed up, "so that a fly can't get in."

Biden said it is "questionable" whether Russia has control of the besieged city of Mariupol, where up to 100,000 civilians - about a quarter the city's peacetime population - remain trapped in cellars and bomb shelters, unable to escape as the humanitarian corridors have not been operating for days.

"There is no evidence yet that Mariupol has completely fallen," Biden said during his press conference.

Ships and ***refugees***

Biden also extended the US package of sanctions to ban all Russian and Russian-affiliated ships from entering US ports "to further deny Russia the benefits of the international economic system." The sanctions are an extension of the fifth package  of EU sanctions that have banned Russian ships from EU ports, excluding some categories such as grain, fertiliser and medicine amongst other essential deliveries.

Biden also announced a new visa programme that would expedite the entry of Ukrainian refuges "directly into the US from Europe," Biden said.

 "This new humanitarian parole programme will complement the existing legal pathways available to Ukrainians, including ***immigrant*** visas and ***refugee*** processing," Biden said. "It will provide an expedient channel for secure legal migration from Europe to the United States for Ukrainians who have a US sponsor such as a family or an NGO. This programme will be fast, it will be streamlined and it will ensure the United States will honour its commitment to the people of ***Ukraine*** and need not go through our southern border."

The US has offered to host up to 100,000 ***refugees***.

A day earlier on April 20 the US extended its fifth package of sanctions to include an addition 40 people and companies, closing more sanction-busting loopholes.

The latest list includes a Russian commercial bank, a virtual currency mining company, and Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev, who is accused by US authorities of financing Russians promoting separatism in Crimea, RFE/RL reports.

The sanctions also targeted the holding company of Moscow-based bitcoin miner BitRiver, which operates a data center in Siberia, and 10 of the holding company's Russia-based subsidiaries, the Treasury Department said.

**Load-Date:** April 22, 2022

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**Want to buy St. Petersburg? Georgians selling NFTs of Russia to raise money for Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 24, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 670 words

**Body**

A Georgian creative agency has joined the cyberwar against Russia by auctioning off digital regions in the Russian Federation as non-fungible tokens (NFTs) to raise money for ***Ukraine***.

The agency, Leavingstone, has recreated Russia's 2,500 regions in an interactive map called "Russia for Sale", selling each one as a card featuring the region's name, size and "weirdly authentic coat of arms". They are sold in the Ethereum cryptocurrency on the NFT marketplace OpenSea, with prices ranging from 0.05ETH ($150) for a small region to 4ETH ($12,000) for a large city like St. Petersburg. Moscow was reportedly sold for nearly $15,000, according to Radio Free Europe.

The interactive map showing all purchasable regions of Russia - from "Russia for Sale" website

"The main goal of this project is to raise funds to help the Ukrainian people rebuild their country", the agency states on the "Russia for Sale" website. "We have a strong connection to ***Ukraine***'s culture and people, all of which are currently defending themselves against the most evil regime of our time: the Russian Federation."

Leavingstone says the funds will be transferred to the Ministry of Digital Transformation of ***Ukraine***, which is on the front lines of the cyberwar with Russia, both defending itself from cyberattacks and conducting offensive operations.

So far the agency has sold 27 lands and raised $18,500, with 100% of the funds raised going towards Ukrainian support. The company also stated that 5% of every NFT resell, a common practice amongst NFT owners who hope to sell on their token for a profit, will go to ***Ukraine***. OpenSea will take 2.5%.

"We saw a huge potential in it - that the majority [of people] would want to be involved in Russia's partition," Leavingstone co-founder Levan Lefsveridze told Radio Free Europe. Georgian citizens have expressed immense solidarity with ***Ukraine*** and the company points to its employees' own experience with Russian military aggression after the invasions of Georgia in 1992 and 2008 devastated the country. Two Georgian territories are still occupied by Russian forces: South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The next stage of the project will include the sale of iconic Russian buildings, including the Kremlin, Winter Palace, and even the $1bn secret mansion suspected to belong to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Finally, Leavingstone announced, "We'll be auctioning Lenin himself. Yep. Stuffed granddaddy of the red revolution will be up for sale!"

This is not the first time NFTs have been used to raise money for ***Ukraine***'s war effort. In fact, crypto-technology is becoming more and more commonplace and has even been utilised by President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's government in addition to more traditional methods like war bonds. Last month, the Ministry of Digital Transformation launched the project "Meta History Museum of War", wherein artworks depicting events from the invasion in chronological order are sold as NFTs.

The project aims to "preserve the memory of the real events of that time, to spread truthful information among the digital community in the world and to collect donations for the support of ***Ukraine***", according to its website.

Although crypto-technology has become integrated into everyday life over the last few years, this is the first time the technology is being used on a large scale during a war.

Ukrainian crypto activists launched a rescue token called UKAN that will help ***Ukraine*** recover from the devastation of Russia's invasion, which has resulted in more than $100bn in damaged infrastructure and a total economic loss of $600bn.

The group hopes that the UKAN token, which they claim is the first of its kind, will funnel money back into ***Ukraine*** to help rebuild infrastructure, provide financial aid to ***refugees*** and casualties of war, as well as support the local production of vital food. Over $6mn has been purchased so far.

"We are the pioneers in the creation of a decentralised economy for humanitarian purposes," the founder of UKAN announced.

**Load-Date:** April 25, 2022

**End of Document**

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**What are Russian troops still doing in Belarus?**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 26, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 890 words

**Body**

While the front line has moved to Eastern and Southern ***Ukraine***, Russian troops still remain in Belarus. Lukashenko is also becoming increasingly uneasy over his international isolation and the regime has expressed interest in reopening a dialogue with the West. So what are the Russian troops still doing in Belarus and what are Lukashenko's objectives with this revived dialogue initiative?

Reduced military activity in Belarus

Today, locals living in the south-east Gomel region in Belarus say that there are no large incoming deliveries of military hardware.

Sometimes there are single pieces of military hardware near hotels, cafes or shopping centres, but mostly the Russian military transports have been reduced to damaged equipment being taken out of Belarus for repairs. While it's possible that some aircraft may remain, people in general have seen no Russian helicopters or aircraft on Belarusian airfields.

Early estimates from independent Belarusian media this week said that 85% of the Russian military equipment that was withdrawn from the Kyiv region into Belarus may have left the country, although this information is still unverifiable.

However, Russia is still very much active in Belarus and Ukrainian intelligence reports that a Russian electronic warfare battalion is building posts for radio interference in Belarus. Moreover, there is still a threat of air and missile strikes on both civilian and military targets in ***Ukraine*** from the territory of Belarus.

The people living in the Gomel region are also still not allowed to go into the forests, and rumours say that this is due to Russian weapons and ammunition caches still being spread out across these areas.

The local authorities have even told the locals to report any findings of weapons, ammunitions or explosives and that failure to do so will lead to prosecution. Why these caches have not been removed, or why the Russian troops have forgotten where they are, is unclear.

Belarusian propaganda and a revived initiative

Since the Bucha massacre was uncovered Lukashenko has called the Ukrainian and western war crimes accusations against Russia fake, and has instead claimed that the British did it.

However, Lukashenko has still maintained his emphasis on peace, which independent analysts noticed in late March.

In his official Easter address he urged his neighbours to "live in peace," something which Ukrainian media outlets found ironic since Lukashenko has allowed Russia to attack ***Ukraine*** from Belarusian territory.

This change in rhetoric towards peace talks is likely the result of the war in ***Ukraine*** not going as predicted, and some Belarusian analysts think that there is noticeable confusion among the officials in Minsk.

Since March, there has been four signs which could show that Minsk wants to de-escalate its tensions with the West.

First, in March, the head of the Polish Union in Belarus was released from prison, something which Poland has wanted for a long time. Secondly, Belarus' State Border Committee announced that Latvian and Lithuanian citizens would be allowed to enter Belarus visa-free for a month between April and May. Thirdly, the state Belarusian media bragged about the fact that the migration centre which hosted ***migrants*** from last year's border crisis between the EU and Belarus was empty.

Fourthly, it recently became known that Belarusian Foreign Affairs Minister Vladimir Makei had sent out a letter to the EU and certain selected EU countries saying that Minsk was ready to resume negotiations.

According to ***Ukraine***'s President Zelenskiy's presidential advisor Oleksiy Arestovych, Lukashenko is also in fact already engaged in separate negotiations with the West.

When Russia's invasion first began, Lukashenko probably thought that the war would be over fast and that he would be handsomely rewarded by Putin and receive favourable trade deals with the new Russian-loyal regime that would be installed in Kyiv.

Things did not go as planned, and now he's even more internationally isolated than he was before, sanctions pressures have increased immensely and Russia has enough of its own economic problems to worry about, never mind giving him any extensive help right now.

Moreover, Lukashenko seems unhappy with being viewed as a Russian vassal without any possibility of taking decisions on his own. This is a status which he acquired as soon as he let Russia attack ***Ukraine*** from Belarusian territory.

While at the same time refusing to admit that Belarus has been an active party to Russia's invasion, he's demanded that Belarus also receives a spot at the table of the Russian-Ukrainian peace negotiations, which would make him a de facto participant in the war.

The strategy which Lukashenko has had since 2020 of tying himself closer to Putin and simultaneously building relations with the West doesn't work anymore; and despite having burnt all the bridge with the West and ***Ukraine***, Lukashenko hopes to be forgiven by simply adopting a rhetoric of "peace" and sending subtle signals hoping that the West will bite.

Lukashenko is hoping that the West will think that it's better to pull him out of the arms of Putin than to isolate him. The only problem for Lukashenko with moving closer to the West is that he still needs Putin, and Putin is not likely to let him off the hook so easily.

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**Moldovan president blames "factions" in Transnistria for provocations**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 26, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 368 words

**Body**

Moldova's President Maia Sandu on April 26 blamed "factions" in Transnistria for the provocations carried out over the past weeks that culminated with the destruction of two telecommunication towers earlier in the day.

"Our analysis at this time shows that there are tensions between different forces within the[separatist] region, [some of them] interested in destabilising the situation," Maia Sandu at a press conference after the Security Council on April 26.

This makes Transnistria, a pro-Russian separatist region within Moldova, vulnerable and poses risks to Moldova, Sandu added.

This was the first time that a Moldovan had identified the presumed origin of the provocations.

Sandu failed to explain the purpose of the provocations in Transnistria - whether they were directed against Moldova, against ***Ukraine*** or against both.

However, she made clear that her country "condemns any provocations and attempts to lure the Republic of Moldova into actions that could jeopardise its peace".

Transnistria's President Krasnoselsky reacted quickly, rejecting the existence of any "factions" in Transnistria and pointing to ***Ukraine*** as being the provocations.

At the same time, Krasnoselsky said he would avoid escalation, and will only identify the authors of the actions.

"As the first conclusions of the urgent operational and investigative measures, traces of these attacks lead to ***Ukraine***," Krasnoselsky said.

Krasnoselsky also said that his state will seek to preserve peace with Moldova.

"Pridnestrovie [Transnistria] maintained neutrality and openly declared this - that we are not aggressors, that Pridnestrovie did not plan and does not plan to attack our neighbours. We accepted ***refugees***. Currently, about 25,000 residents of ***Ukraine*** are in Transnistria, where they receive proper support from the state. Everyone is well aware of this. I assume that those who organised this attack have the goal of dragging Transnistria into the conflict. And I can say with confidence that it will not work. Transnistria will be able to defend itself. We will definitely find everyone who is an accomplice in these criminal acts. But it will not work to drag us into a conflict," Krasnoselsky assured.

**Load-Date:** April 27, 2022

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**Shame and anger in Bulgaria as PM urges citizens to donate salaries to buy weapons for Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 26, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 702 words

**Body**

Bulgarians expressed anger and shame after a call by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov on Facebook for citizens to make financial donations directly to ***Ukraine*** to buy weapons after the ruling coalition failed to find a compromise on this issue.

Petkov's Change Continues formed a four-party coalition to put an end to months-long political instability last year. One of the parties, the pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), is blocking any attempts by the government to provide military aid to ***Ukraine***, while another member of the coalition, Democratic Bulgaria, is threatening to quit if the country does not send weapons. Petkov's party is trying to balance between the two positions.

"I call on every Bulgarian citizen who really wants to help ***Ukraine*** to donate one salary like me. Words are easy, actions are difficult, it is time for Facebook posts to turn into funds for ***Ukraine***. The state [comprises] all of us and anyone must feel that he can be part of the solution," Petkov wrote on Facebook.

His initiative sparked anger among Bulgarians who are already volunteering and supporting ***Ukraine*** and ***refugees*** from the conflict in any way they can, including providing free accommodation, transportation from war zones, food, money, medicines and free medical care. Many also donate funds to NGOs in ***Ukraine*** that are acquiring military equipment for the army.

Petkov was accused of being coward and of not being a leader at the time of war.

"The elite is chosen to lead, not to waver between appropriate points [of view] ... nor to take the shameful decision not to send a representative to ***Ukraine*** as the BSP did," political analyst Evgeniy Daynov commented in an interview with public broadcaster BNR.

Petkov has said that he will lead a delegation to visit ***Ukraine***. However, the BSP decided not to send a representative despite being part of the ruling coalition.

The prime minister was criticised for not taking firm leadership in this tough situation and people urged him to lead the country.

"This war changes everything. From now on, every politician who was acting, or every public figure during the war, will be judged for what they did during the war. Even if you try to hide from the winds of war, they will still reach you. The whole world realised that Bulgarians are mice. I am ashamed of that," Dainov said.

His opinion was widely backed by citizens. Petkov was also criticised by his coalition partners. Slavi Trifonov, the leader of There Are Such People (ITN), wrote on Facebook that the prime minister's initiative was "stupid".

"The idea of Kiril Petkov, who is a prime minister, for Bulgarians to donate money for weapons to ***Ukraine*** is the most monstrous nonsense I have ever heard," Trifonov wrote.

Meanwhile, the gratitude expressed to Petkov by ***Ukraine***'s Foreign Minister Dmitro Kuleba on Twitter was interpreted as rather ironic than true.

"Grateful to Prime Minister of Bulgaria Kiril Petkov for initiating a public campaign to raise funds for ***Ukraine*** and help us strengthen our defences. This move demonstrates true Bulgarian solidarity with ***Ukraine***. I felt it well when I was received by PM Petkov in Sofia last week," Kuleba wrote.

The post contrasts with Kuleba's harsh criticism of Bulgaria over the lack of decisive steps towards providing much-needed military aid to his country during his visit to Sofia last week.

At the same time, ***Ukraine***'s Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna also urged Bulgaria to provide weapons that would support ***Ukraine***'s euro-integration by helping it win the war and guarantee its stability.

Meanwhile, the New York Times reported that Bulgaria has been exporting weapons to ***Ukraine*** via a US company.

Bulgaria, along with five other countries, sells Soviet-era weapons and ammunition to ***Ukraine*** through the US company Ultra Defense Corp., based in Tampa, Florida, according to the New York Times. The company works with arms factories in Bulgaria, Romania, Bosnia, Serbia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, which provide the so-called "non-standard ammunition".

There were no details on the amounts of weapons allegedly exported by Bulgaria. Economy Minister Kornelia Ninova, who is also the leader of the BSP, denied the claims.

**Load-Date:** April 27, 2022

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**Emerging Europe growth to fall to an average of 3% this year, says wiiw**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 28, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 1058 words

**Body**

Growth in Central and Southeastern Europe (CESEE) will be 1 percentage point (pp) lower than expected in January because of the war in ***Ukraine*** and the imposition of new sanctions on Russia, the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) said in its spring forecast.

The economic think-tank said that the CESEE region expanded by 6.3% last year, 1pp faster than the euro area, representing a strong rebound after it contracted by only 2.1% in 2020 compared with a plunge of 6.4% in the euro area because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The 2021 growth meant the region exceeded the pre-pandemic level of 2019 by 4.1pp, with 17 of the region's 23 countries registering recovery stronger than the decline of 2020. Only Montenegro, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, ***Ukraine***, Czechia and Slovakia have yet to exceed their pre-pandemic GDP levels.

In its new baseline scenario, which assumes a mid-year ceasefire in the war, the wiiw predicts average growth of around 3% this year, with the most pronounced slowdown in Turkey (8.3pp), where last year's credit boom has already run into balance-of-payments constraints, and the Western Balkans (4.5pp). There are big downward growth revisions in Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic states, which are more vulnerable both to disruption in trade with Russia and to geopolitical risks.

Trade disruption will cost most CESEE economies some 0.5pp of GDP growth this year, it says. For instance, the automotive industry is already suffering on account of a shortage of car components (many of which come from ***Ukraine***) and the large-scale, voluntary withdrawal from Russia of Western car manufacturers.

However, it warns that risks are clearly "tilted to the downside" and in its adverse scenario - which assumes the West imposes oil and gas sanctions on Russia, leading to a doubling of energy prices in 2022 - growth will average just 0.1%, with half of the countries in the region plunged into recession.

Outside the CIS and ***Ukraine***, recessions would likely to be deepest in Hungary, Slovakia and Turkey, reflecting their heavy dependence on Russian gas and the limited short-term possibilities for its substitution. Turkish growth is 2.7% in the basic scenario but there would be a 2.5% recession in the adverse one.

In this scenario, soaring energy prices will be felt everywhere, pushing inflation into double-digit territory. Turkey's inflation rate is expected to rise to 55% even without an energy embargo, and to 67% if an embargo is introduced.

There would also be a rise in risk premiums, and confidence and investment would fall across the region. Economic sentiment in CESEE already weakened considerably in March, with the Western Balkans being worst affected because it is seen as politically fragile.

Recession in Russia; collapse in ***Ukraine***

For Russia, the wiiw predicts a 9% decline in GDP this year - an 11pp downward revision to its previous forecast - or a plunge of 15% in its adverse scenario.

The economy will also decline 1.5% in 2023 before recovering by 1% in 2024. Inflation would be 20%, or 28% in its adverse scenario.

Thanks to wide-ranging capital controls and monetary policy tightening, financial stability has been restored, the wiiw says, and the ruble has recovered to nearly pre-war levels.

"Even if the EU were to impose an energy embargo, the financing of the war would probably only be jeopardised in the medium term: however hard it might hit the economy, the Russian government has the reserves and the fiscal leeway," argues Vasily Astrov, senior economist.

However, as also argued by EBRD chief economist Beata Javorcik this week, the full effect of trade sanctions has yet to unfold and, along with the withdrawal of many foreign firms, this will hamper long-term growth prospects.

"Already we see that there are supply-chain problems in many sectors because of the sanctions," said Astrov. "That, together with the withdrawal of many Western companies, for example in the car industry, is hammering industrial production."

Production levels in the automotive industry have so far plummeted by 50%, compared to last year. Some 600 Western firms have announced that they are pulling out of Russia.

"Even with a ceasefire and a political solution, a strong recovery is unlikely to get underway until 2024, since private investors will probably be slow to return to the country," says Astrov.

In a webcast to present the results, Astrov was even gloomier about Russia's long-term prospects, saying "Russian GDP will grow by 1% if at all long term".

He was also pessimistic about Russia being able to substitute trade links with China and India for those with the West. "The technology that Russia needs comes from market leaders in advanced countries," he pointed out.

In ***Ukraine***, the wiiw says that those Ukrainian regions that have been directly affected by the war account for 53% of GDP, 43% of industrial production, 34% of agricultural production and 50% of goods exports. More than a quarter of the population has been displaced as of mid-April, with 6.4mn ***refugees*** leaving the country and an additional 7.1m internally displaced.

The country is poised for imminent economic collapse, with its economy projected to shrink by 38% this year in the baseline scenario (which assumes a ceasefire from the middle of the year and the start of reconstruction), or by 45% in the adverse scenario. The wiiw's downward revision to the baseline scenario is 41.5pp.

The war will wreck the government budget - with the fiscal deficit projected to balloon to 25% of GDP this year - and it will have to be largely covered by Western official assistance.

The wiiw predicts a gradual recovery in 2023, accelerating in 2024, assuming the West provides a large-scale assistance package akin to the post-WWII Marshall Plan. In 2023 the wiiw forecasts that ***Ukraine***'s GDP will grow 5%, before surging by 13% in 2024.

The IMF this month predicted that Russian GDP would fall by 8.5% this year, while ***Ukraine***'s would collapse by 35%. Earlier this month the World Bank forecast respective declines of 11.2% and 45%. Capital Economics has predicted Russian GDP will shrink by 12% and that ***Ukraine***'s economy could halve. At the end of March the EBRD predicted a fall of 10% in Russian GDP, and 20% in ***Ukraine***'s economy.

Wiiw forecasts (baseline scenario)

**Load-Date:** April 28, 2022

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**Czech Archbishop Duka defends Russian soldiers for raping Ukrainian women**

Intellinews - Russia Today

April 29, 2022 Friday

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**Length:** 540 words

**Body**

The Czech Republic's conservative Catholic Archbishop Dominik Duka has appealed to the Czech public not to condemn Russian soldiers for atrocities they commit on Ukrainian women. The head of the Czech Catholic Church said in his blog that soldiers who rape women are not excused for their war crimes, however, they are acting under the pressure of emotions and passions in a state of agony.

According to him, these soldiers are often victims of "the strongest emotions and passions, when the terror of battle, fear and hatred really bring then to the level of a kind of amok",

His comments were immediately widely criticized by fellow Christians, politicians and women's rights organisations.

"No violence, especially violence as agonizing and brutal as rape, can be excused in any way. But the opposite, such acts must be unequivocally condemned. Russian soldiers have no business in ***Ukraine*** and should not be committing such atrocities there. Christians are to help and stand on the side of the victim," commented Marian Jurecka, labour minister and chair of the Christian Democrats party, which is closely connected to the Catholic Church.

"The topic is explosive and the cardinal knows it. He is aware that practically anything he says on it will provoke some kind of reaction. But that cannot prevent him from saying what his conscience and the Church's teaching say should be said," Jiri Prinz, a spokesperson for the Archbishopric of Prague, told iDNES.cz.

Duka also criticised the Czech supply of contraceptive pills to ***Ukraine*** a few weeks ago, to help Ukrainian women raped by Russian soldiers. According to Duka, using this contraceptive pill can cause trauma for women.

"Duka´s blog is completely wrong. No one is asking the church to buy [emergency contraceptive pill] Postinor. The Bible says there is a silence in which the rationality of man is revealed. If I can't help it, I should at least be quiet," said another the Christian Democrat Governor of the Jihomoravsky Region Jan Grolich.

The cardinal has been regularly criticized for his opinion on the gay and lesbian communities, who Duka considers to be a threat to the Catholic Church, or for his comments that ***refugees*** should find the courage to return to their countries of origin.

The head of the Catholic Church has also for some time been criticised for his politicisation of the church, in particular his close ties to rightwing former President Vaclav Klaus and the current pro-Russian populist President Milos Zeman. In 2008 he allegedly advised Christian Democrat MP Jiri Hanus who to vote for in the presidential election.

On many issues Duka and Zeman hold the same positions. Duka has been reproached for serving the mass to the athiest Zeman in November 2015 in Lany, which was perceived as a symbolic political gesture.

"His Eminence Dominic Cardinal Duka is an exceptionally respected representative of the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic and it is also largely to his credit that we are gradually removing the barriers that have existed for many years between the church and the state in our country," Zeman wrote in a letter published in 2018 defending Duka when part of the Czech faithful asked the Pope not to extend his mandate.

**Load-Date:** April 29, 2022

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**Bulgaria's parliament approves military-technical aid for Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 4, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 515 words

**Body**

Bulgaria's parliament gave a mandate to the government to provide military and technical aid to ***Ukraine*** after a heated five-hour debate on May 4. The government was supported by the pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) despite threats it would quit the ruling coalition should the government decide to send weapons to Kyiv.

The move was expected after earlier on the same day Vitaly Moskalenko, the Ukrainian ambassador to Bulgaria, provided to lawmakers a letter from President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who said the country does not specifically require weapons but asks for help with repairs to the military equipment it already has.

"The National Assembly gives the mandate to the Council of Ministers of Republic of Bulgaria to discuss and apply a package of measures related to the war in ***Ukraine*** and its consequences," says the text of the decision - a historic move in the country that was widely known to be pro-Russian before the invasion.

The parliament voted to allow the government to provide humanitarian, financial, technical and military aid to ***Ukraine***, including to back Kyiv's application for EU membership, help ***refugees*** and send humanitarian aid, medicines, clothes and food.

The government is also allowed to secure exports of Ukrainian wheat from the Black Sea city of Varna. ***Ukraine***'s military equipment can be repaired in Bulgarian arms factories.

The decision was also backed by the opposition Gerb and Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS).

The BSP commented that the decision was "reasonable" and gave up its plans to leave the coalition since Zelenskiy has not specifically requested the delivery of Bulgarian weapons.

Meanwhile, the far-right pro-Russian opposition Vazrazhdane party announced a civil disobedience, urging people to stop executing their duties towards the state and to occupy the state institutions. According to recent polls, Vazrazhdane's supporters are rising but still are far below 10% of voters.

Prior to the vote, Bulgaria's Prime Minister Kiril Petkov has been attempting to soften the widely diverging positions of his coalition partners with the BSP saying that would quit the coalition if military aid is approved, while Democratic Bulgaria threatened to leave if the aid is not approved.

In a desperate move, Petkov called on citizens to donate money to ***Ukraine*** to acquire weapons, which had triggered a wave of disapproval.

After Russia's Gazprom decided to stop gas deliveries to Bulgaria, Petkov's Change Continues took a firmer stance and said that it will back the request for military aid because ***Ukraine*** can and should win the war started by Russia.

Meanwhile, President Rumen Radev took the opposite position, threatening that if Bulgaria agrees to provide military aid, this would mean direct involvement in the war. He suggested that Russia could attack the country, which does not have adequate means to protect itself.

At the same time, there were reports suggesting that Bulgarian military equipment is already being exported to ***Ukraine*** via third countries, mostly via Poland, the US and the Czech Republic.

**Load-Date:** May 5, 2022

**End of Document**

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**Russian fertility rates fall to record lows on the back of a deteriorating economy and sanctions pressure**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 4, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 1211 words

**Body**

The decline in the size of Russia's population is accelerating, driven by a combination of the arrival of the demographic dip caused by the 1990s and one of the lowest fertility rates in the world.

Russia saw a rapid expansion in population during the Soviet era as the country was industrialised and the population moved into the cities. The population rose from circa 100mn in 1945 following WWII to 148.5mn in 1992, after which the economic chaos of that decade both depressed fertility and increased the death rates, especially amongst men. Life expectancy in particular crashed after the economy collapsed in 2009.

Now things are even worse. Compared to the peaks of the boom years in the early noughties, fertility rates in Russia have fallen by almost a third and are now even lower than in the mid-1990s, when an average of 9.3 children were born per 100,000 people.

While the death rate is growing at the same time, the natural population decline continues to accelerate: 264,300 people per quarter, or 7.3 people per 100,000 of the population - new all-time lows for the entire modern history of the country.

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Between 1993 and 2008, Russia's population saw a considerable decline in its population from 148.37mn to 143.25. However, after Russian President Vladimir Putin took over in 2000 he put demographics at the top of the agenda and launched a comprehensive reform to boost the population, as featured by bne IntelliNews in "Putin's babies". The fruits of these reforms began to appear in around 2008 when the population began growing again.

As the population pyramid shows the demographic dip from the 1990s was working its way steadily up the pyramid but the base began to expand again in the late-noughties.

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The population increased again to 145.9mn recently; however, the population was expected to peak at the end of 2020 and is projected to start declining again.

Russia has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world of 1.58 births per woman, which is also below the replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman. Russia also has one of the oldest populations in the world with an average age of 40.3 years, according to demographers.

In the last decade Russia has made up for the demographic shortfall in its natural population by attracting significant numbers of economic ***migrants***, mostly from Central Asia. However, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic of recent years coupled with a deep devaluation of the ruble in 2014 and again in 2020 has made Russia less attractive as a work destination and the number of ***migrants*** has fallen significantly, worsening the demographic problems.

Demographers have estimated Russia will fall from the ninth most populous country to 17 by 2050 as a result of these problems and act as an additional break on growth, on top of the other problems that have now been exacerbated by the extreme sanctions imposed on Russia as a result of the war with ***Ukraine***.

Putin has announced that he plans to boost Russia's dwindling population by encouraging immigration and higher birth rates, but estimates show that Russia's population will drop from 2014's 142mn to only 128mn by 2050.

These problems were already very visible at the end of the 1990s, when demographers became increasingly alarmed at where Russia was heading. The problems were spelled out in a seminal paper by Murray Feshbach, a Senior Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Centre, entitled "Russia's Health and Demographic Crises", that was widely cited and made dire predictions of the rapid fall in the population.

But Putin's mother and child reforms successfully defied the worst case scenarios. Feshbach, who made his name studying infant mortality patterns in Soviet Russia, predicted in 2003 that Russia's population could fall from 144mn in 2003 to 70mn-100mn by 2050. If his forecasts had been correct then Russia's population should have passed below 115mn in 2020, whereas it was actually 146mn.

Feshbach said the halving in births from 2.5mn in 1987 to 1.2mn in 2002 had been a major factor in Russia's population decline, but even the current 1.58 birth rate is still better than those of the 1990s.

The rise in life expectancy has also worked to offset the low fertility rates, but not by enough to prevent the population from shrinking. The average life expectancy of Russian males in 2003 was only 58 years, against 72 years in the US. Since then, male life expectancy in Russia has recovered to 72.7 in 2021, but down from 73.1 years by 2019, according to the World Bank. At the same time the expanded deaths from the coronacrisis and the expected economic slowdown that will come with the sanctions are both likely to pull life expectancies down further.

Russian emigration is also a problem. While emigration was low during the boom years of the noughties, it started to explode in 2012 after Putin began his third term as president. More recently, since the start of the war in ***Ukraine*** in February an estimated 1mn Russians have left the country and emigration is anticipated to stay high as the economic situation continues to deteriorate.

According to preliminary information from a population census held between October 15 and November 14, 2021, Russia had a population of 147mn as of October 1, 2021, and the final number might be 500,000 larger or smaller, Federal State Statistics Service (RosStat) head Pavel Malkov said in April as cited by the Moscow Times. Since the previous population census in 2010, the Russian population has grown by approximately 1.8mn (it stood at 145.14mn, including residents of Crimea, in October 2010).

Boosting the population is also part of the 12 national projects under the title of "Demography" that has had RUB4 trillion assigned to it. The programme was launched in 2018 and got off to a slow start. It gathered some momentum in 2019, but was delayed again by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and will now be delayed again after sanctions have frozen half of the government's funds and caused a fiscal squeeze as the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) scrambles to shore up the country's liquid reserves in the face of the extreme sanctions.

According to the results of the first quarter of this year, 320,400 children were born in the country, which 16,600 less than in January-March last year, Rosstat reported in April.

There were almost two deaths per birth (584,700 people), and the relative birth rate - 8.9 children per 100 thousand of the population - has become the lowest since 2000.

The only reason that the population decline is not going even faster is the reforms and programmes launched by Putin two decades ago are still working to hold up birth rates. But real incomes have been in decline since 2014, and after a brief period of growth last year they are expected to start declining again now, and that will in turn drag birth rates down again.

Real incomes grew by 3.1% last year after having contracted by 8.5% in preceding seven years. In the first quarter of 2022, real incomes of Russians started to fall again as the war got underway and were down by 1.2% y/y. With the economy expected to decline by between 8% to 15% this year incomes will only fall further, with analysts polled by the CBR predicting real incomes will contract by 12.2% in 2022.

**Load-Date:** May 4, 2022

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**Russian ambassador to Poland attacked with red paint by anti-war protesters**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 10, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 345 words

**Body**

Anti-war protesters threw red paint over Sergey Andreev, Russia's ambassador to Poland, on May 9, as he attended a ceremony to lay flowers at the Soviet Military Cemetery on an anniversary of the allied defeat of Nazi Germany in World War Two.

The ambassador took part in a scaled-back event after Poland objected that any larger ceremony would be most unwelcome in the context of Russia's war in ***Ukraine***. Victory Day is one of Russia's most important commemorations, celebrating the defeat of the Nazis by the Soviet Union at a price of 27mn dead.

As Sergeev arrived at the cemetery, he was surrounded by protesters, some flying Ukrainian flags, who yelled "fascists" at the Russian delegation. After a short while, someone threw what appeared red paint at the ambassador.

"I don't even know what to call it ... They ruined our sacred day, the Victory Day," Sergeev said at the scene, according to news portal gazeta.pl.

A number of protesters had waited for the ambassador at the cemetery with a banner reading "War criminals" and pictures of war destruction in ***Ukraine***. An inscription in blue and yellow, the colours of the Ukrainian flag, reading "Kill Putin" appeared on a monument at the cemetery but was later removed, private broadcaster TVN24 reported.

Russia's foreign ministry issued a "strong protest" to Warsaw for - it said - "indulging, in fact, neo-Nazi thugs".

Poland said that the incident was "regrettable" and that it "should not have taken place".

"Diplomats enjoy particular protection, irrespectively of policies pursued by their governments," Poland's foreign ministry added.

Following the Russian attack on ***Ukraine*** in late February, Poland's relations with Moscow sank to an absolute low overnight. Both sides have since expelled each other's diplomats while Russia's embassy in Warsaw regularly sees rallies and protests in front of it.

Warsaw also seized a Russian-owned building in Warsaw with a view to renovating it for Ukrainian ***refugees***, hundreds of thousands of which have arrived in the Polish capital since the start of the war.

**Load-Date:** May 10, 2022

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**EBRD expects 30% GDP contraction in Ukraine in 2022, lowers emerging Europe projections**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 10, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 1526 words

**Body**

A severe contraction now expected at 30% this year in war-torn ***Ukraine*** has dragged down the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's (EBRD) projection for growth across its area of operations in 2022 to just 1.1%.

The development bank has issued two new sets of projections since Russia invaded ***Ukraine*** in February, which has had a negative impact across most of the emerging Europe and southern and eastern Mediterranean (Semed) regions.

In its latest Regional Economic Prospects report issued on May 10, the EBRD has lowered its forecast for the region as a whole by 0.6 percentage points (pp) compared to its previous projections in March, and by 3.1pp compared to November 2021.

At the same time, the development bank warns of soaring inflation in the region, exacerbated by the disruption caused by the war and related sanctions on international energy and food markets.

While it is the expected deep contraction in ***Ukraine*** that is mainly dragging down the headline figures, a number of economies across the region have also had their projections lowered, as the effects of the war spread.

The EBRD has lowered its forecast for ***Ukraine*** this year to a contraction of 30%, down from a 20% contraction projected in March. It has held its forecast for Russia steady at a 10% contraction.

"Only last November we were predicting growth of 3.8% across our regions for this year. But at the time we described last year's recovery and its momentum into 2022 as bitter sweet, tainted by worries over high commodity prices," says EBRD chief economist Beata Javorcik.

"The situation now is more concerning still, with new rises in food and energy prices, driven by Russia's war on ***Ukraine***, further stoking inflation."

A recovery in growth to 4.7% is expected in 2023, which is 0.3 pp down compared to the March forecasts. This is still considerably slower than the 6.7% growth recorded in 2021.

Given the extreme uncertainty of the geopolitical situation, the EBRD warns that all of its current set of forecasts are vulnerable to major downside risks, should the scale of the war expand or if the flow of exports of gas or other commodities from Russia is restricted further.

For example, more disruptions to gas supplies could lower the output per capita in the EBRD regions in 2022 by 2.3% lower than its baseline scenario.

For the moment, the EBRD is forecasting a strong rebound to 25% growth for ***Ukraine*** next year. However, it adds, "this assumes that substantial reconstruction work is by then already underway. How long the hostilities last, the shape of any post-war settlement, the extent of reconstruction and how many ***refugees*** return home will also influence the recovery's speed."

Inflation soars

Across the EBRD regions, inflation soared to 11.9% in March, the month after the invasion, which is close to the peak recorded during the international financial crisis in late 2008.

"Oil prices are elevated and gas prices in Europe are above historical highs and around four times the level in the United States, putting European producers at a disadvantage.

"Prices of wheat, corn, soybeans and other agricultural commodities have also risen rapidly," the EBRD says.

"Many economies in the EBRD regions are highly dependent on gas in their energy mix, while some economies in the Caucasus and southern and eastern Mediterranean rely heavily on wheat imports and have historically sourced wheat from both Russia and ***Ukraine***," adds the report.

The fastest growing economies in the region this year are expected to be Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, both gas-rich nations. The report notes that Turkmenistan "stands to benefit from elevated gas prices and its `splendid isolation' - from Russia and global capital markets". Azerbaijan, meanwhile, is the only country in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus "that is likely to benefit from current energy sector developments, at least in short term, due to its status as a major hydrocarbons exporter and one of the potential alternative (to Russia) gas suppliers of Europe".

Aside from energy, the EBD lists the importance of Russia, ***Ukraine*** and to a lesser extent Belarus - also the target of western sanctions - on international agriculture markets. Both ***Ukraine*** and Russia are major exporters of agricultural commodities, together accounting for almost 70% of global exports of sunflower oil in 2019 and almost 30% of global wheat exports. Meanwhile, Belarus and Russia are major exporters of fertilisers and fertiliser ingredients such as ammonia and potash.

The burden of rising food and energy prices falls disproportionately on poor counties and households. "[A]s we well know, poorer households suffer even higher rates of inflation than others because food and energy account for a larger share of their domestic budgets," said Javorcik.

According to the EBRD, spending on utilities accounts for over 20% of household income in Romania, Armenia and Moldova, against around 7% in Germany. And while food accounts for 15% of the consumer price index in Germany, it is as high as 30-37% in Jordan, Morocco, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia.

Impact through trade and tourism

While the expected contraction in Russia is considerably smaller than in ***Ukraine***, as the largest economy in emerging Europe this has a broad impact in the region.

"Besides the impact of high food, energy and metals prices, some economies in the EBRD regions are also vulnerable thanks to trade, tourism and migration-remittance links to Russia," the report says.

"Russia is an important trade partner for some economies in the Caucasus and to a lesser extent in the Baltics and Central Asia," it added.

In Central Asia, growth is expected to slow to 3.1% this year, though the only forecast to be lowered in May was Mongolia's, by 2.5pp. This reflects "the resurgence of COVID-19 in China resulting in additional border restrictions", the report says.

The EBRD also notes Central Asia's "strong economic links with Russia's economy". "Economies in Central Asia are vulnerable to drops in remittances from Russia, as ***migrants*** return home, the ruble faces limited convertibility and flight connections are reduced," the report says.

The EBRD's Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region that comprises the three South Caucasus counties plus Moldova and ***Ukraine*** is dragged down by the sharp contraction in ***Ukraine***; excluding ***Ukraine***, the region is forecast to grow by 3.3% in 2022 and 3.4% in 2023. The EBRD cut its 2022 forecasts for Azerbaijan by 0.5 pp and for Moldova - seen as vulnerable to a spillover of the conflict - by 1.0 pp.

On the other hand, Georgia's growth forecast was lifted by 1.0 pp for 2022 and 0.5 pp for 2023. This follows its stronger-than-expected recovery in 2021 and strong support from international development partners. In addition, initial currency depreciations in Georgia (and Kyrgyzstan) have been reversed.

In Central Europe, projections have been lowered by 0.2pp for 2022 and 0.8 pp for 2023, to 3.2% in 2022 and 3.4% in 2023. That reflects 0.5 pp downgrades for the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia in 2022, while the forecasts for Hungary and Poland remain unchanged. Poland is set to be the fastest growing economy in the Central Europe region this year at 4.0%.

The downward revisions since March reflect higher food and energy prices and supply chain disruptions. "Economies in Central Europe are also closely integrated in manufacturing supply chains with ***Ukraine***. For instance, owing to lack of deliveries of parts from ***Ukraine***, a number of car factories had to partially or fully suspend production and look for alternative suppliers as hostilities escalated," the EBRD report says.

Looking at Southeast Europe, GDP in the EBRD's South-Eastern European Union region (Bulgaria, Greece and Romania) is expected to grow by 2.6% this year and 3.2% in 2023, after downward revisions for Bulgaria and Romania. The forecasts for Croatia and Slovenia (included in the EBRD's Central Europe region) have also been lowered modestly.

The projections for the Western Balkans are almost unchanged; the region is expected to grow by 3.2% in 2022 and 3.6% in 2023, down by 0.1 pp for 2022 and unchanged for 2023. The only amendments to the forecasts are a cut in Albania's 2022 projection by 0.3 pp to 3.0% and an increase in Bosnia & Herzegovina's by 0.7 pp to 3.0%.

The rebound of the tourism sector started in 2021, when small tourism-dependent economies such as Croatia, Georgia and Montenegro were among the fastest growing in the region.

However, tourism in the region is likely suffer as a result of the war and related sanctions. As the EBRD points out, in 2019, spending by Russian tourists provided between 1% and 2% of GDP in Estonia, Montenegro and the South Caucasus countries.

The EBRD has not amended its forecast for Turkey's growth in 2022 or 2023; the country's economy is predicted to grow by 2% this year, supported by a modest recovery in net exports, the development bank says. Growth is then set to accelerate to 3.5% in 2023, not least because of a pre-election expected hike in government spending.

**Load-Date:** May 10, 2022

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**Thousands march in Bulgaria against Russian war in Ukraine**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 10, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 191 words

**Body**

Several thousand people marched in Bulgaria on May 9 to protest against the Russian war in ***Ukraine***, enlightening the Russian embassy with the colours of Ukrainian flag  and throwing toys dyed in red to resemble blood.

"No to rashism" was the slogan of the march which gathered Bulgarians and Ukrainian ***refugees*** for yet another protest. Since the start of the war, Bulgarians have been gathering at least once a week to protest against the war.

Since the start of the war, More and more Bulgarians are disapproving of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the traditionally pro-Russian population is turning to the West. However, Bulgaria remains one of few EU member states that believe that Nato should be blamed for the Russian war in ***Ukraine***, according to a poll by the UK polling agency YouGov.

44% of Bulgarians think that Nato is entirely responsible for the war - the highest share in the Europe, while 13% think that Nato and Russia are equally responsible and 20% do not know. Just 23% think that Russia is entirely responsible for the war.

The survey was carried out in 16 countries from the EU and the UK between April 1 and April 25.

**Load-Date:** May 10, 2022

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**EBRD 2022: Living in a time of turbulence**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 11, 2022 Wednesday

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**Length:** 1242 words

**Body**

The war in ***Ukraine*** is spilling out to affect the economies of the entire catchment area of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which includes Emerging Europe, Central Asia and North Africa.

There will be an economic slowdown emanating with decreasing severity from the epicentre in the Donbas region of ***Ukraine***, but while ***Ukraine*** will of course take the worst hit, the looming food crisis in North Africa and possible debt crisis caused by soaring inflation could possibly do long-term damage to the countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, say the EBRD experts.

The war in ***Ukraine*** has come at a bad time for many emerging countries in the region that were already weakened by the coronavirus (COVID) pandemic. Having spent heavily on support measures for their populations, the spike in commodity prices, especially energy, coupled with soaring inflation, which has forced central banks to make growth-killing rate hikes, has only added to the headaches.

"All the post-COVID gains will now be wiped out," said the EBRD's chief economist, Beata Javorcik, during a panel discussion of the economic outlook for the region at the EBRD's annual meeting in Morocco. "Many countries in the region already had depleted financial reserves and now the high inflation is driving up the cost of borrowing that adds to their problems... Many countries that have not talked to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for years are now opening talks as they work out a way to fund their countries."

For ***Ukraine*** the EBRD expects a 30% GDP contraction this year. Javorcik estimates that between a third and half of all its companies have temporarily ceased work and that territory that accounts for 60% of gross production is currently the scene of hostilities.

In addition to the destruction in ***Ukraine***, another factor that will depress ***Ukraine***'s recovery is that around 13mn people have been displaced, either internally or who have left the country completely, out of a population of around 35mn.

"It's the biggest ***refugee*** crisis since WWII - more than the ***refugees*** that fled Syria," says Sergei Guriev, Professor of Economics at France's Institut d'Études Politiques (Sciences Po) and former EBRD chief economist.

Russia too will be badly affected, with a 10% GDP contraction, says Javorcik, which is less than some other estimates "but it is still more than at the height of the COVID crisis and it's quite a contraction". An article in the Russian press the same week, based on a leaked Russian Ministry of Finance document, put the internal contraction estimate for this year at closer to 12%.

Marshall Plan

Thought is already turning to reconstruction, but the task is daunting. While the Kyiv Economic School has estimated that some $600bn of total economic damage has been done, Guriev, together with colleagues, has done a first estimate of the cost of a mooted Marshal Plan to rebuild the country and concluded it will need to amount to between $200bn and $500bn.

"That is unprecedented," he told bne IntelliNews. "In current terms the original Marshal Plan cost $160bn in today's dollars, so this is going to be the biggest ever programme."

Russia will have to contribute to the cost and Guriev and others assume that some sort of reparations will be imposed on Moscow.

"Moscow will refuse to pay, but then the West will have to seize Russian assets," says Guriev. That could include the approximately $300bn of Central Bank of Russia (CBR) assets seized at the start of the war, which are only frozen and technically still belong to Russia.

But the pain for Russia is not the 10% contraction per se, but the fact that the Russian economy will not bounce back after the war is over.

"This is not like the COVID crisis where economic contractions were deep, but it was clear the economies would bounce back once the epidemic was over," says Guriev. "The sanctions will remain in place and Russia has been decoupled from Europe. This will hit everyone: the people, the oligarchs, they will all see a huge drop in income of at least 10%. It is hard to be optimistic about the short-term outlook for either of these two countries."

Guriev said that the extreme sanctions imposed on Russia would slowly deplete its ability to fight by slowly removing its income from the export of hydrocarbons, but also limiting Russia's access to technology.

"Russia will have lots of cash in the short term but it can't make tanks and rockets without access to technology," Guriev said. "Even leaky sanctions will stop the war when it runs out of its stock of modern weapons and chips. It cannot replace Western technology with Indian or Chinese tech. The Russian story has crystallised how globalisation benefits countries and how reliant everyone is on global trade."

North Africa spillovers

Heike Harmgart, EBRD Managing Director of the Southern & Eastern Mediterranean area, said that the effects of the war would be felt too in Morocco where the EBRD annual meeting is being held.

"[Morocco] dealt with the coronavirus [COVID-19] pandemic well. Morocco has the highest vaccination rate in all of Africa and put in 7.4% growth in 2021. A similar story was playing out in all the countries in the South and Eastern Mediterranean region, except Lebanon," said Harmgart. "But Morocco used up a lot of its international reserves. ***Ukraine*** is not affecting the country directly but it will have a massive indirect effect, mainly via food insecurity."

All of the countries in the South and Eastern Mediterranean are big grain importers, a large part of which comes from Russia and ***Ukraine***. While the disappearance of ***Ukraine***'s harvest only makes up a few percent of global grain production, so it should be possible to supply the region with food, the impact of food price inflation will by itself be extremely destructive. Morocco has already been having food trouble as it is currently suffering from the worst drought since the 1980s and food prices were already rising before the ***Ukraine*** war started.

Javorcik pointed out that it is the poor that are particularly vulnerable to the soaring food prices, as food typically makes up at least a third of the average shopping basket.

"It means that the government will have to take action or they could see political instability - a repeat of the Arab Spring that affected 40 countries - but they have to do this at a time of reduced resources and much higher borrowing costs," says Javorcik.

Some governments in North Africa have already re-launched subsidies for bread during Ramadan that has just come to an end, in order to keep a cap on discontent. However, these are stop-gap solutions and the problems are anticipated to remain for the rest of the year.

Economists are starting to wonder if the world is about to face a period of stagflation, where prices keep rising at the same time as production decreases. That puts central banks in the paradoxical position of hiking interest rates that only depresses growth further.

One of the dangers, says Javorcik, is that economists fear inflation expectations will become unanchored - the population's inflation expectations are based on their previous experience and also the things they buy the most. As food prices are rising so fast the population comes to believe prices will rise much faster than the economic indicators show is the reality. This is in itself inflationary and fuels the stagflation problem.

**Load-Date:** May 11, 2022

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**EBRD 2022: President says it is supporting wartime commerce in Ukraine and planning for the future**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 12, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 1067 words

**Body**

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has switched its focus and is pouring help into ***Ukraine*** as it struggles to cope during the war with Russia, but thought is already turning to the eventual reconstruction of the country when peace finally returns, the president of the development bank Odile Renaud-Basso said at a press conference on the last day of its annual meeting on May 12.

"We are meeting of course as the world was trying to recover from the COVID pandemic and the world is now confronted with the war in ***Ukraine***, which alongside major loss of life, major destruction, is bringing additional and fresh economic strain, threatening energy and food security," Renaud-Basso said. "There will be some impact from this war beyond the immediate region to all our countries of operation... The EBRD will use all of its resources to support all these countries."

The war in ***Ukraine*** has been at the heart of all the discussions amongst the delegates that gathered in Marrakech in Morocco from the 73 member countries, as the wide economic effects spill out to affect counties throughout Emerging Europe, Eurasia and down into Africa.

Renaud-Basso said that the EBRD was very fast to react to the news of Russia's invasion of ***Ukraine*** on February 24 and protested "within hours" of the first tanks crossing the border. Both Russia and Belarus were swiftly cut off from using any of the EBRD resources.

"Since the assault on ***Ukraine*** in the early hours of February 24 the bank has moved swiftly. As the biggest international investor in the country, within hours of the attack we condemned Russia for starting the war and stated our unwavering support for ***Ukraine***," said Renaud-Basso.

The EBRD very quickly made available a €2bn package of support for ***Ukraine*** and other countries in the region to deal with the ***refugee*** crisis amongst other measures.

However, with the Russian forces' withdrawal from around Kyiv and its increasing focus on the Donbas, the rest of the country is beginning to return to normal with the support of the EBRD.

"From what we have seen we have been very impressed with the resilience of the economy in ***Ukraine*** and the institutions. I met with the central bank and the finance minister and they were explaining that the banking sector is functioning. Most of the bank branches are open and the banks can provide financing and people are depositing their money. There were no bank runs. So the system is really functioning," Renaud-Basso said. "And we see the same in public companies. We have signed a contract with [power company] Ukrenergo and the company is functioning and delivering electricity. And the sowing campaign is going on with the support of the government."

Nevertheless, all ***Ukraine***'s companies are under pressure and Renaud-Basso reported that many of the bank's clients have asked for payments to be postponed or rescheduled, which the bank has been doing.

"There was a big shock at the beginning of the war with a bit of a standstill, but things are now coming back. One of the major challenges, and especially for the agri-businesses, is the question of logistics. The ports were blocked and it was a very important way to export grains and this remains a huge challenge, but we have seen a lot of SMEs and companies from different sectors developing different ways to alternative ways [to export] through Poland and other countries."

The governors have decided to support ***Ukraine*** in both the short and long-term and we are "already beginning to think about reconstruction whenever it becomes possible", Renaud-Basso said. During the controversial governor's meeting on May 11 the donors committed to supplying an additional amount "towards €1bn" of funds to support ***Ukraine***.

"We will deploy this money alongside our own resources to support infrastructure and companies in ***Ukraine*** and other affected countries. It is an outstanding expression of confidence in the bank and definitely helps us invest into projects worth a much greater amount," Renaud-Basso said.

The war is not over, but after Russia refocused its military effort into "Phase 2" and concentrated on capturing the Donbas region and the southeastern corner of the country, the rest of the country has largely returned to Kyiv's control. The economy in the government-controlled regions is slowly starting to restart with shops and cafes in Kyiv reopening.

The National Bank of ***Ukraine*** (NBU) reported on May 10 that card terminal usage across the country shows that the Ukrainian economy is gradually returning to work, with the number of non-cash payment terminals owned by PrivatBank increasing by 42% in the last two weeks, with small businesses resuming card payments more actively. At the start of the war the number of active terminals fell by 66% at its lowest point, and the volume of transactions fell by 39% during the first two months.

The EBRD believes that between 30% and 50% of all ***Ukraine***'s companies have suspended operations but as the military operations are now more concentrated in the eastern regions, small businesses in particular are starting to revive their operations and the EBRD has launched a programme worth €150mn specifically to support this activity.

However, the country still needs help to keep the power on and municipalities need cash to cope with the millions of people that have been internally displaced, not to mention help to allow farms to start on the sowing season.

Renaud-Basso said that the EBRD is also helping with these sectors, providing trade-financing facilities and it signed off on a €50mn loan to Ukrenergo, the national power company, to provide emergency liquidity to the company so that it could continue to provide electricity to the grid. In addition there was another €53mn package to provide farmers with funds to allow them to work.

Overshadowed by the ***Ukraine*** war, the bank's governors also took another historical decision during this year's meeting and approved a "limited and phased" expansion of the EBRD's operations to sub-Saharan Africa and Iraq.

"This doesn't mean we will be starting activities there yet. Further steps will be needed. For now our focus will be on the ***Ukraine*** crisis and we will come back, subject to further decisions taken by our board of governors, with the next steps on sub-Saharan Africa and Iraq no later than this time next year," Renaud-Basso said.

**Load-Date:** May 13, 2022

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**Bulgaria targeted by increasing cyberattacks from Russia**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 12, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 264 words

**Body**

Bulgaria has been targeted by an increasing number of cyberattacks with available data showing that they were carried out by Russian hacker groups, E-government Minister Bozhidar Bozhanov said as quoted by Radio Free Europe on May 11.

In mid-April, Bulgarian Posts was blocked by a hacker attack on its servers. The attack came shortly after Prime Minister Kiril Petkov announced that pensioners will receive additional money for Easter and prior to its distribution. In Bulgaria, people can receive their pensions at post offices if they do not have a bank account or wish to get their money in cash.

"On April 4 the virus was installed on the servers of Bulgarian Posts. After that, a week or two it was staying until the moment when it will cause maximum damage - when pensions and additions for Easter are being distributed. This is one of the indicators that this was coordinated, targeted attack," Bozhanov said.

Moreover, the virus was designed not to attack a server with operational system set for any of the former Soviet republics. Bozhanov said that other institutions, such as the state agency for ***refugees***, were also attacked and that the data also indicates this was carried out by Russian hackers.

"The targets rather show that this was coordinated. The state agency for ***refugees*** currently is very busy with the Ukrainian ***refugees***. It is clear that this attack is not random," he said.

Bulgaria raised the security of key institutions at the start of Russian war in ***Ukraine***. It also blocked more than 45,000 websites distributing Russian propaganda and fake news.

**Load-Date:** May 12, 2022

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**EBRD 2022: Food security in times of crisis**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 12, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 1398 words

**Body**

Morocco is suffering from the worst drought in 40 years and India is in the middle of a crushing heat wave that has seen temperatures rise to a sweltering 62C. Climate change and now the war in ***Ukraine*** have put an enormous strain on the global food supply system and the SEMED countries of North Africa are in the firing line, as they are the world's biggest importers of grain.

The EBRD has been investing in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia since September 2012 and added Lebanon in 2018 as well as in the West Bank and Gaza, which are collectively known as the SEMED countries by the development bank.

Ekaterina Krivanos, the senior economist for markets and trade at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN, painted an alarming picture of falling food security in North Africa during a panel discussion at the EBRD's annual meeting in Morocco on May 11.

Between 720mn and 811mn people faced hunger in 2020, which was an increase of 118mn from a year earlier, and this number may fall but the UN FAO estimates that some 660mn people will still be facing a lack of food by 2030. In 2021 over 190mn were already living in a food crisis or worse, Krivanos added, which is nearly double the number from 2016.

Food security has always been a problem but it is a problem that has got worse in the last few years as a series of shocks have hit the global economy one after another, starting with the food price increases caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020 and followed by the Russo-Ukrainian war.

"The increase in cost of a healthy diet and high levels of income inequality put healthy diets further out of the reach of more people in Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean," Krivanos told the conference delegates.

Rising prices

The problem is actually not a new one, as food prices have been climbing for several years already, and todays woes and wars have only exacerbated an already existing problem, says Gérald Theis, the chairman of CereMed UK.

"The increase in grain prices didn't start on February 24. Basically it all started more than two years ago with the COVID crisis," says Thesis. "We started to see some funny, protectionist behaviour starting with China that started to massively buy grain, especially corn, to cap the meat inflation in China. That was the first big disruption. Then we saw Russian willing to cap internal Russian inflation, especially in bread, so it started to implement quotas as to how much can be exported."

Supply of grain on the global markets was already limited as other countries in Latin America followed suit with taxes and quotas to shore up their own domestic supplies, and that led to the first bout of food price inflation and sent prices up 50%.

"Then February 24 happened. For grain traders that was like 9/11. We had a tsunami - let's call it a tsunami," said Thesis. "For eight trading sessions in the Chicago Board of Trade, the main grain market, we saw eight days of "limit up" - go from one limit to the next one - and in eight days we saw a move of nearly $200 per tonne, or price rise of 160%."

Thesis said the last time traders had seen such a big increase in prices was in 2007 when Russia imposed an export ban on grain, but it took a lot longer.

"If you asked me about the feeling of the traders this time, it was a nightmare," Thesis said. As for the outlook for the war and the price of grain, Thesis said the market has no idea.

"But if this war were to stop tomorrow we will not go back to normal," Thesis said. "And that also includes the sanctions. I know that food is not included in the sanctions, but they are making things very difficult for exporters and trading houses."

Thesis believes that prices will remain at a "very high level" and will also be extremely volatile even when peace returns. The emphasis will be on diversifying sources and a return to more government-to-government deals. He also highlighted that production problems will also have a big impact on prices.

Four main drivers

There are four major factors at play in the current crisis and they are negatively related to each other, which further undermines global food security.

The first two are external to food systems, conflict and climate, and those that are internal are low productively and inefficient supply chains that push up the cost of food, making a healthy diet unaffordable to lower income people. "High and persistent levels of inequality only make the situation worse," says Krivanos.

Since 2014-16 the levels of food insecirty have increased in the SEMED countries. In 2021 conflict was the primary driver in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, which also hold the most ***refugees*** from Syria. Amongst ***refugees*** food insecurity can affect half (49%) of the population.

"An unprecedented public, political and economic crisis unfolded in Lebanon in 2021, making it much more severe," says Krivanos.

Counter-intuitively, the SEMED region also has high rates of obesity.

"Obesity is significant and growing, in particular in Egypt and Lebanon, where the rates are double the global average," says Krivanos.

The problem with food security is not so much the lack of grain as price rises putting food supplies out of the reach of lower income earners. Currently the UN FAO reports that food prices are at an all-time high, with the food prices index jumping in March to unprecedented levels with new all-time highs, especially for vegetable oils, cereals and meats.

"In April 2022 the indices stabilised somewhat but remain at their highest levels since 1990, driven by disruptions; weather shocks and the war in ***Ukraine*** has further exacerbated the situation by disrupting grain supplies," Krivanos said.

Russia and ***Ukraine*** are world leaders in key staples and combined they account for 30% of global wheat and 20% of maize. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries are heavily dependent on imports from these two countries, but several countries in sub-Saharan Africa are also exposed.

The most affected countries are Jordan and Lebanon, both of which depend on imports of around three quarters of their food supplies and where around half of the population are facing food insecurity, according to UN FAO calculations.

Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco import just under half their food needs and around a quarter of their populations face food insecurities, but the drought in Morocco this year has made the situation worse than normal. Egypt is particularly exposed to the Russo-***Ukraine*** war, as it sources 42% of all the calories it imports from Russia and ***Ukraine***. And Egypt, along with Lebanon, import three quarters (75%) of their wheat from Russia or ***Ukraine***.

"All the countries in SEMED region are net importers of food and heavily rely on them to source dietary energy. At the extreme Jordan sources 80% of all calories available in the country through imports. What this means is global food shocks will affect, and are already affecting, these countries," says Krivanos.

For policymakers the problem they need to solve is dealing with the growing food import bill, rather than access to grain supplies per se.

"Food import bills in SEMED can be expected to increase since the war in ***Ukraine*** started. We are already seeing high prices," says Krivanos.

The governments of SEMED countries will need to adopt a broad variety of policies to mitigate the rise in prices to prevent a crisis, which can be short- to long-term and include diversification of food import sources and making import more efficient, but other priorities include longer-term food import transformation and raising the competitiveness of high-value food exports such as fruit and oil, which will compensate for increasingly expensive imports.

This year's EBRD Annual Meeting and Business Forum, its 31st, is only the second to be held in what the bank calls the southern and eastern Mediterranean and, because of the pandemic, the first to be held in a physical setting since 2019.

The 2022 Annual Meeting and Business Forum, which ends tomorrow and features numerous panels all being live-streamed, is also the first to be held on the continent of Africa.

The bank has invested €3.3bn in Morocco since it began working in the country 10 years ago - and €15.8bn in the wider southern and eastern Mediterranean, which also includes Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and the West Bank and Gaza.

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**Influx of Russians seems to be behind near-50% surge in Armenia's number of IT workers**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 24, 2022 Tuesday

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**Length:** 237 words

**Body**

Armenia on May 23 reported a near-50% surge in the number of officially registered IT workers in the country, a development that appears to reflect a recent influx of skilled ***migrants*** from Russia in the wake of its invasion of ***Ukraine*** and repercussions that followed.

Government data disclosed by Economy Minister Vahan Kerobyan showed Armenian software development firms as employing around 20,000 people as of end-April, up from around 13,500 a year ago.

MassisPost reported how in a Facebook post, Kerobyan said that the number of tech jobs registered with the tax authorities rose by 2,300 in April alone. He did not comment on the reasons for the sharp increase.

The IT industry dominated by software developers has long been Armenia's most dynamic sector. It has expanded at double-digit annual rates since the early 2000s. A list of the country's 1,000 largest corporate taxpayers released by the State Revenue Committee in January included 36 tech firms.

Many of the thousands of mostly young Russians who left Russia for Armenia following the start of the war with ***Ukraine*** are computer programmers and other IT professionals.

Kerobyan said in early March that some Russian tech companies were moving operations to Armenia to evade Western sanctions imposed on Moscow, MassisPost also reported, saying the sanctions restricted their access to high technology and complicated their financial transactions abroad.

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**Estonian minister says Russia should be barred from WHO decision-making process**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 26, 2022 Thursday

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**Length:** 437 words

**Body**

The Russian Federation and other aggressor states should not be allowed to participate in the World Health Organisation's (WHO) decision-making process, the Latvian Minister of Health and Labour Tanel Kiik (Centre) said at the 75th World Health Assembly in Geneva on May 24.

"Three months ago, on February 24, our world changed because Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime refused to give peace a chance," Kiik said in his address to the assembly, according to the Ministry of Social Affairs. "The Russian Federation's large-scale war against ***Ukraine*** will have devastating consequences for health and well-being that can last for generations. Estonia condemns Russia's military aggression in the strongest of terms. We stand with ***Ukraine*** and its people in this difficult times - in words and, more importantly, in actions."

This year's World Health Assembly is focused on the theme of "Health for Peace, Peace for Health". According to Kiik, this theme has a broad consensus among most WHO member states - but not all.

"The Russian Federation, which is brutally killing children and other civilians, and bombing homes, schools and hospitals, should not be allowed to take part in the WHO's decision-making until full respect of international law and human rights is restored," the Estonian minister said. "The same applies for all other aggressor states. Also, the WHO's European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases should be relocated [from Moscow]. This is the least we can do."

The World Health Assembly is the primary decision-making body of the WHO and is comprised of 194 member states. Each year, delegates from all member states of the WHO convene at the assembly to agree on the organisation's priorities and policies.

Estonia was among 46 member states to propose a resolution at the assembly on May 23 entitled "Health emergency in ***Ukraine*** and ***refugee*** receiving and hosting countries, stemming from the Russian Federation's aggression."

In the framework of the assembly, Baltic delegations in Geneva also met with Ukrainian Minister of Healthcare Viktor Liashko and WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

On March 9, the ministers of health of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania sent Ghebreyesus and WHO Regional Director for Europe Hans Kluge a joint appeal in which they called on the WHO to provide comprehensive support to ***Ukraine***'s medical system and bar Russia from the organisation's decision-making process.

Thus far, Estonia has provided ***Ukraine*** with more than €235mn worth of humanitarian and defence aid, including weapons, medicine and medical supplies.

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**Russian IT programmer who `encountered negative attitudes in Georgia' joins influx into Armenia**

Intellinews - Russia Today

May 29, 2022 Sunday

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**Length:** 252 words

**Body**

A Russian IT programmer who departed Russia for Georgia, but then decided to move on to Armenia after encountering what he said were negative Georgian attitudes towards Russians, plans with partners to open a co-working space in Gyumri, Armenia's second-largest city, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported on May 29.

Artyom Yemelyanov is one of thousands of information technology workers who left their homes in Russia and moved to Armenia after the Russian invasion of ***Ukraine*** that began in late February.

Georgia has strained relations with Russia over its breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Armenia, according to 32-year-old Yemelyanov, is more welcoming to Russians.

"Free-thinking people are not wanted in Russia, but abroad all Russians are considered aggressors," Yemelyanov was cited as saying, adding: "If I had not left, later that opportunity might have closed for me. If a person is smart and skilful enough, he will find a job. [Free-thinking] people are just fleeing from [Russia]."

Armenia has tried to maintain a neutral position and keep a low profile in relation to the war in ***Ukraine***. Gyumri, incidentally, is home to a Russian military base.

Russians are allowed to enter Armenia and stay for up to 180 days on the basis of their Russian identity documents.

The Armenian government on May 23 reported a near-50% surge in the number of officially registered workers in Armenia's IT sector. The jump is almost certainly a consequence of the influx of skilled ***migrants*** from Russia.

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