

Ukraine

CONFLICT UPDATE

Ukraine Conflict Updates

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

March 22, 2022

ISW published its most recent [Russian campaign assessment](#) at 5:30 pm EST on March 21.

The ISW Russia team has relaunched its Ukraine Conflict Updates as a semi-weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from March 18—21.

Key Takeaways March 18-21

- The Kremlin is unlikely to withdraw its maximalist political demands of Ukraine in ongoing negotiations, despite the Russian military failing to achieve its objectives.
- The Kremlin staged a 195,000-person rally in Moscow attended by President Putin on March 18 to falsely portray high levels of public support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Kremlin bans of Facebook, Instagram, and other major western platforms in Russia are likely intended to coerce these companies to meet Russian censorship standards to retain their market share in Russia.
- Russian officials continue to downplay the impact of new sanctions and proposed retaliatory measures against international companies that have left Russia.
- The Kremlin continued to set conditions for a possible false flag chemical or radiological attack in Ukraine by promoting false claims of threats from United States-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine.
- Eastern European NATO heads of state called for a more proactive NATO military posture and response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the leadup to an emergency NATO summit on March 24.
- China publicly stated it will not provide financial or military assistance to Russia and pledged further humanitarian assistance to Ukraine but blamed the United States for the war in Ukraine.

Key Events March 18—March 21, 5:00 pm EST

Negotiations:

The Kremlin retains its maximalist political demands in ongoing negotiations with Ukraine and is unlikely to soften them despite the Russian military failing to achieve its objectives. Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated Russia’s political demands in a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on March 17.¹ The Kremlin demands that Ukraine become “neutral” by renouncing its NATO membership ambitions, demilitarize by halting all western military aid or weapons sales to Ukraine, and “denazify.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov defined the “denazification” of Ukraine as the abolition of any laws that discriminate against Russian-speaking populations on March 18—the first time a senior Kremlin official has publicly stated the Kremlin’s definition of Ukrainian “denazification.”² Putin additionally stated that Ukrainian negotiators must resolve these issues before he will engage in leadership-level negotiations with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on the status of Crimea and Donbas.³ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov accused Ukraine on March 18 of prolonging the negotiations and delaying an agreement with Russia.⁴

Turkish mediation efforts are unlikely to lead to a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called for direct negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 19, but Chief Turkish Presidential Advisor Ibrahim Kalin stated that Putin was not ready for such talks.⁵ Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu claimed Russia and Ukraine were close to an agreement on “critical issues” on March 20, possibly signaling a ceasefire. However, head Ukrainian negotiator Mikhalo Podolyak said on March 17 that negotiations on “disputed points” could take anywhere from several days to one and a half weeks, and Peskov denied that negotiators are currently considering a ceasefire on March 21.⁶

Ukrainian negotiators and government officials are signaling their willingness to concede on NATO membership aspirations but are highly unlikely to meet Russia’s other demanded concessions. President Zelensky signaled he is willing to consider a Ukrainian neutrality policy in return for other security guarantees from Western states during an interview with *CNN* on March 20.⁷ Zelensky stated on March 20 that Ukraine will not agree to any deal that forces it to surrender territory or sovereignty.⁸ Zelensky also said on March 21 that any agreement with Russia would be subject to a country-wide referendum before being adopted.⁹ Ukraine is highly unlikely to make any major concessions to Russia due to the current military stalemate and failure of Russia’s initial campaign plans. The Ukrainian population is additionally highly unlikely to support any major concessions to Russia.

Russian Domestic Opposition and Censorship:

Kremlin bans on Facebook, Instagram, and other major western platforms in Russia are likely intended to coerce these companies to meet Russian censorship standards to retain their market share in Russia. A Moscow District Court blocked Facebook and Instagram from operating in Russian territory on March 21 due to its claimed “extremist activities,” citing Facebook’s decision to not block calls for the death of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, though calls for violence against Russian civilians remain violations of Facebook’s user guidelines.¹⁰ The Kremlin likely intends for this ban to coerce Facebook and other western companies active in Russia to meet Kremlin information demands and the Russian prosecutor general’s office said that it would not punish individual Russians for using VPNs and other measures to access Facebook and Instagram shortly after the ruling.¹¹ Over 34 million Russian Instagram users could still use the platform as of March 20 despite the Kremlin’s ban of the site and VPN services.¹² Kremlin-run media also amplified reports from anonymous Russian officials on March 18 that Russian state censoring agency Roskomnadzor could ban YouTube in the

“coming days.”¹³ Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev said social media companies will need to prove a “good attitude towards Russia and its citizens” to be unbanned.¹⁴ The Kremlin continues to target Russian journalists and teachers who do not follow the Kremlin’s line on the war in Ukraine. St. Petersburg police arrested several Russian journalists covering anti-war protests on March 19.¹⁵ Russian officials have also arrested several teachers who refuse to discuss the war in Ukraine according to state standards.¹⁶

Kremlin Narratives:

The Kremlin staged a 195,000-person rally in Moscow attended by President Putin and other pro-war protests throughout Russia on March 18 to falsely portray high levels of public support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷ Putin celebrated the eighth anniversary of Russia’s annexation of Crimea at a Moscow stadium and gave a speech promoting the war in Ukraine.¹⁸ Putin, Kremlin officials, and prominent Russian musical performers advanced the Kremlin’s narrative that the war to “denazify” Ukraine has created historic unity among Russians. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed on March 21 that the rally demonstrated the vast popular support for Putin’s decisions and Russian combat in Ukraine. The Kremlin forced government employees to attend and paid attendees.¹⁹ Social media users reported witnessing advertisements to attend the rally a few days prior to the event. Many participants reportedly left the rally as soon as 30 minutes after entering the stadium.²⁰ Although the rally was likely successful for TV propaganda, the Kremlin faces continued domestic resistance to the war.

The Kremlin continued to set conditions for a possible false-flag chemical or radiological attack in Ukraine by promoting false claims of threats from US-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine. The Kremlin has proliferated false claims about threats from US-sponsored biolabs in Ukraine since at least 2020.²¹ Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized the “unacceptability” of claimed US military-sponsored biological activities in Ukraine during a conversation with the Luxembourg prime minister on March 19.²² Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov promoted this narrative in public comments about US-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine on March 18.²³ The Russian Defense Ministry called an ammonia leak at a chemical plant in Sumy, Ukraine, on March 21 a Ukrainian “provocation” despite reports that Russian shelling caused the leak.²⁴ Russian media also circulated claims about increased radioactivity levels in the Black Sea and misquoted statements by UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace to claim the UK supports Ukraine developing nuclear weapons on March 21.²⁵ ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin is setting informational conditions to possibly blame Ukraine for a Russian-conducted or Russian-fabricated chemical or radiological false-flag attack against civilians as a pretext for further Russian escalation.²⁶

Russian Reactions to Sanctions:

Russian officials downplayed the impact of new sanctions and proposed retaliatory measures against international companies that have left Russia. EU member states, Australia, and Japan banned certain exports to Russia and imposed new sanctions targeting Russian individuals, assets, and companies between March 18-21.²⁷ Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized that Russian businesses should not fear sanctions on March 17.²⁸ Kremlin officials claim that Russia has grown accustomed to sanctions and has a sufficient “margin of safety” to protect the Russian economy from Western sanctions that they claim the West would have imposed anyway to limit Russia’s development.²⁹ Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev stated on March 19 that sanctions against Russia are “temporary” and claimed that Western citizens will suffer economic consequences from losing access to Russian energy.³⁰ Evgeny Fedorov, Chairman of the Russia State Duma (Parliament) Committee on Economic Policy and member of the ruling United Russia party,

proposed a bill to ban companies that left Russia from resuming operations for ten years on March 18.³¹ The Kremlin likely seeks to deter other international companies from halting their operations in Russia.

Belarus:

N/A

Russian Occupation:

Russian forces continue to detain local civil society leaders and civilians in Ukraine and set conditions to govern occupied areas of Ukraine.³² The Russian military detained local leaders and media personnel in Enerhodar, Melitopol, and a village in Kharkiv Oblast between March 18-21.³³ The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry also accused the Kremlin on March 21 of shipping Mariupol citizens to detention camps.³⁴

Drivers of Russian Threat Perceptions:

Eastern European NATO heads of state called for a more proactive NATO military posture and response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the leadup to an emergency NATO summit on March 24.³⁵

- **Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced on March 18 that Poland will formally propose a NATO peacekeeping mission in Ukraine to protect international aid deliveries to Ukraine at a planned March 24 NATO summit.**³⁶ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov denounced Poland's suggestion as "demagogic" on March 19 and claimed that NATO peacekeeping forces would take control of western Ukraine.³⁷ The Polish ambassador to the United States said the mission is not intended to provoke Russian aggression on March 20.³⁸ The US ambassador to the United Nations (UN) announced that the US would not participate in any possible NATO mission in Ukraine on March 20.³⁹
- Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas argued that NATO should switch from a "deterrence posture" to a "defense posture" during an interview on March 20. Kallas suggested that NATO members should increase their NATO military spending to supplement smaller member-states' defense capabilities.⁴⁰
- Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov announced on March 19 during a joint press conference with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin that Bulgaria is establishing a multinational NATO battlegroup, including a US Stryker company, and will lead military exercises designed to bolster Bulgarian and NATO military readiness.⁴¹

Foreign Involvement:

China publicly stated it will not provide financial or military assistance to Russia and pledged further humanitarian assistance to Ukraine but blamed the United States for the war in Ukraine.⁴²

- US President Joe Biden met virtually with Chinese President Xi Jinping on March 18. Biden emphasized that China would face significant consequences from the West if it accepted Russian President Vladimir Putin's

request for Chinese support.⁴³ Xi urged the United States to negotiate with Russia and blamed the United States for the crisis.⁴⁴ Russian media framed Xi Jinping's statements on March 18 as a rejection of the United States and claimed that Xi is growing closer to Russia.⁴⁵

- Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng blamed NATO expansion for the war and emphasized China's opposition to Western sanctions against Russia on March 19 at a conference in Beijing, China.⁴⁶
- Chinese Ambassador to the United States Qin Gang stated on March 20 that China is not considering sending financial or military assistance to Russia.⁴⁷
- China's Foreign Ministry announced on March 21 that China will send an additional \$1.57 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine, supplementing roughly \$790,000 in aid it sent earlier in March.⁴⁸

Israel rejected Ukraine's request for military equipment on March 21 and opted to provide humanitarian aid instead.⁴⁹ Israel continues to seek to maintain its neutrality between Ukraine and Russia.



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