

# Ukraine

## CONFLICT UPDATE

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

March 25

The ISW Russia team's Ukraine Conflict Update is a semi-weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from March 22-24. All of Russia's team's coverage of the war in Ukraine—including daily military assessments and maps, past Conflict Updates, and several supplemental assessments—are available on our [Ukraine Crisis Coverage](#) landing page.

### Key Takeaways March 22-24

- **Kyiv remains firm that Russia must return Crimea and Donbas to Ukraine, despite Kremlin claims that Zelensky is willing to discuss recognizing Russian control over these temporarily occupied territories.**
- **The Kremlin increased its rhetoric accusing the West of posing an existential threat to Russia and refusing to rule out the use of nuclear weapons in the event of threats to Russia to deter the West from further supporting Ukraine.**
- **Western leaders continued to sound alarms about potential Russian chemical or biological attacks in Ukraine.**
- **The Kremlin continues to undercount Russian deaths in Ukraine, which have likely passed 10,000 dead since February 24.**
- **Western sanctions are successfully disrupting Russia's military industry and energy exports.**
- **Russian forces are likely forcibly relocating Ukrainian citizens to Russia to establish control over occupied areas and gain political leverage.**
- **The EU and NATO announced both short- and long-term plans to increase military defense spending, troop deployments to Eastern Europe, and military assistance for Ukraine.**

## Key Events March 22-24

### Negotiations:

**Ukrainian officials remain firm that Russia must return Crimea and Donbas; the Kremlin increasingly claims Kyiv is stalling negotiations. Russia is unlikely to reduce its maximalist demands despite the failure of its initial military campaign.** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated on March 22 and 24 respectively that Ukraine must regain control of Crimea and Donbas, refuting Russian media claims that Zelensky would discuss recognizing Russia's illegally occupied territories.<sup>1</sup> Kuleba also said that Ukraine is negotiating security guarantees with the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on March 23 that Russia does not oppose Western mediation in Russia-Ukraine negotiations but repeated that Russia has "red lines" on Ukrainian integration into Western structures.<sup>3</sup> Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said on March 22 that peace talks with Ukraine were moving slower than expected.<sup>4</sup> Lavrov and Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed that Ukraine is constantly changing its position under manipulation from the United States.<sup>5</sup> The Kremlin likely incorrectly anticipated a quick Ukrainian capitulation, but is unlikely to reduce its maximalist demands in the near term and the war will likely protract.

### Russian Domestic Opposition and Censorship:

**The Kremlin began implementing new laws against spreading "fakes" about its war in Ukraine and increasingly seeks to convince Russian citizens that any opposition to the war is treason.** Moscow's Presnensky Court detained a Russian citizen in the first criminal case for spreading "fakes" about Russian military activities in Ukraine on March 22.<sup>6</sup> The pro-Kremlin political party "A Just Russia" encouraged civilians to persecute anti-Kremlin dissent by launching a website on March 21 to report authorities' "intentional shortcomings" and turn in "traitors."<sup>7</sup>

**The Kremlin continued measures to control the domestic information space by regulating YouTube and Google News.** YouTube unblocked the Russian State Television and Radio Fund channels in Russia on March 24, complying with a Roskomnadzor demand made on March 19.<sup>8</sup> Roskomnadzor also blocked Google News on March 23 and claimed that the platform provided "fake information" about the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> The Kremlin will likely attempt to coerce other Western companies to retain or restart operations in Russia in exchange for complying with Russian government censorship.

**Isolated signs of dissent are appearing among Russian government officials.** Russian Special Representative for Relations with International Organizations Anatoly Chubais resigned on March 23 and has likely left Russia. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced the "dismissal" of Chubais later in the day and maintained Chubais did not resign over Ukraine on March 24.<sup>10</sup> Chubais was the chief of staff for former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and is the highest-ranking official to publicly break ties with the Kremlin after the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> *Bloomberg* also reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin rejected Russian Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina's resignation sometime shortly after the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

## Kremlin Narratives:

**The Kremlin labeled Western actions surrounding Ukraine as potential “existential threats,” seeking to intimidate the West and possibly set conditions to use nuclear weapons.** Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov refused to rule out Russian use of nuclear weapons if it faces an “existential threat” during an interview with *CNN* on March 22.<sup>13</sup> Other Kremlin mouthpieces warned about Western efforts to subjugate and destroy Russia in the following days. Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev claimed on March 23 that the United States aims to “humiliate, limit, and destroy” Russia before targeting China, claiming this will result in a “nuclear explosion.”<sup>14</sup> Kremlin Spokesperson Maria Zakharova echoed these claims on March 23.<sup>15</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed on March 23 that the West seeks to establish a unipolar world order and that Ukraine was “chosen as a tool” to suppress Russia’s independence.<sup>16</sup> Russian presidential aide Vladimir Medinsky accused the West of putting “the very existence of Russia at stake” on March 24.<sup>17</sup> The Kremlin likely seeks to intimidate Western states into limiting their activity in Ukraine by portraying a low threshold for “existential threats” that would prompt Russian use of nuclear weapons.

**The Kremlin continued to promote disinformation about US-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine and US chemical weapons in Europe to set conditions for a potential false-flag chemical or biological attack.** Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov claimed on March 22 that the United States had not destroyed its alleged chemical weapon arsenal in Europe and that Russia cannot tolerate US-funded biolaboratories that could develop biological weapons in Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> The Russian State Duma opened an investigation into the alleged US-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine on March 22, and Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin demanded that President Biden explain his son’s involvement in Ukrainian biolaboratories on March 24.<sup>19</sup> The Kremlin also began fabricating baseless evidence to support their claims. The Russian Embassy in South Africa tweeted a map of alleged Pentagon biolaboratories in Ukraine on March 22.<sup>20</sup> Russian Defense Ministry Representative Igor Konashenkov claimed on March 24 that Russia had obtained documents from Ukrainian biolaboratory employees that indicate direct US involvement.<sup>21</sup> The Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation claimed on March 24 that the Kremlin is flooding the Russian information space with these “false reports” and stressing the need for Russia to strike Ukraine pre-emptively.<sup>22</sup>

**Western leaders are escalating their warnings that Putin is considering staging a false-flag chemical or biological attack in Ukraine.** US President Joe Biden and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz separately warned on March 23 that Russian claims of Ukrainian and US biological weapons indicate a “real threat” that Putin is considering deploying such weapons himself.<sup>23</sup> NATO approved an aid package to Ukraine with equipment to detect, protect, and respond to a chemical weapons attack on March 24.<sup>24</sup> ISW previously assessed on March 9 that the Kremlin is setting informational conditions to possibly blame Ukraine for a Russian chemical or radiological false-flag attack against civilians as a pretext for further Russian escalation.<sup>25</sup>

**The Russian military continues to suppress Russian casualty numbers, which have likely surpassed 10,000 dead.** Pro-Kremlin tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported and quickly deleted an article on March 22 citing the Russian Defense Ministry that 9,861 Russian soldiers have been killed

and 16,153 have been wounded in Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda* claimed that hackers posted the “fake news,” and Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on the initial report.<sup>27</sup> The Kremlin released new casualty figures on March 25 stating 1,351 soldiers had been killed and 3,825 wounded, likely a severe undercount.<sup>28</sup> By comparison, NATO estimated on March 23 that 7,000-15,000 Russian troops have been killed in the current invasion.<sup>29</sup>

### **Russian Reactions to Sanctions:**

**Western sanctions are successfully degrading Russia’s military industry and energy exports despite Russian efforts to mitigate their impact.** The *Kyiv Independent* reported on March 22 that Russia’s largest tank manufacturer, Uralvagonzavod, suspended operations due to supply shortages stemming from Western sanctions.<sup>30</sup> On the same day, the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSMTC) established an “operational headquarters” to mitigate the impact of sanctions on the Russian military-industrial complex.<sup>31</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin tried to allay fears about sanctions on March 23, claiming food rushes in Russia had fallen.<sup>32</sup> The Moscow Exchange Index reported a rise of 4.5% on its first open trading day on March 24 after a one-month closure.<sup>33</sup> Putin also announced that Russia will only send energy exports to designated “unfriendly” states if they pay in rubles, a move likely intended to both punish Western states and mitigate sanctions.<sup>34</sup> Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba urged European states not to make gas payments in rubles; German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Germany would not pay for gas in rubles.<sup>35</sup>

**The United States, United Kingdom, EU, and G-7 countries announced more sanctions against Russian officials and entities on March 24, including State Duma members and the Wagner Group.**<sup>36</sup> Western countries also continued freezing and seizing Russian state and businessmen’s assets as more private companies ended operations in Russia.<sup>37</sup>

### **Russian Occupation:**

**Russian forces are likely forcibly relocating citizens from Ukraine to establish control over occupied areas and gain political leverage.** The Mariupol City Council claimed on March 24 that Russian soldiers have forcibly deported 15,000 Ukrainian civilians to Russia.<sup>38</sup> The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry claimed on March 24 that Russian forces transported at least 6,000 civilian hostages to camps and plan to relocate thousands more to gain political leverage over Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> Russian forces may additionally use forcibly relocated Ukrainian civilians as hostages in negotiations with Kyiv.

### **Drivers of Russian Threat Perceptions:**

**The European Union (EU) and NATO agreed on plans to increase short- and long-term military defense spending and troop deployments to Eastern Europe.**

- NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO members agreed to double their Defense Investment Pledge to support deployments of four battlegroups to Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria during a NATO summit on March 24. NATO battlegroups consist of approximately 1,000 soldiers.<sup>40</sup> The new deployment will double the number of battlegroups on NATO’s eastern flank.<sup>41</sup>

- The European Council (EC) passed the Strategic Compass legislation on March 22 to increase defense spending and enhance military and technological capabilities by 2030. The legislation will improve deployment capacity and agility as well as advance the EU’s counterintelligence and cybersecurity programs.<sup>42</sup>
- The EU doubled its military assistance for Ukraine from 500 million euros (about \$550 million), last budgeted in February 2020, to 1 billion euros (about \$1.01 billion) on March 23.<sup>43</sup>
- Finland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom announced further defensive military aid shipments to Ukraine, including thousands of anti-tank missiles, on March 23 and 24.<sup>44</sup>
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called for unlimited military aid “without restrictions” to help Ukraine protect itself from Russia during an address to NATO members on March 24.<sup>45</sup>

### **Foreign Involvement:**

#### **Turkish and Israeli efforts to mediate a ceasefire in Ukraine are unlikely to succeed in the near term.**

- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on March 22 that Turkey is holding frequent discussions with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to reach a ceasefire agreement.<sup>46</sup> Turkish Foreign Minister Melvut Cavusoglu also encouraged fellow NATO members to focus on bringing about a ceasefire agreement instead of only applying sanctions at the March 24 NATO summit.<sup>47</sup>
- Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett offered to mediate peace talks between Ukraine and Russia in Kyiv, Ukraine, in an official statement on March 22.<sup>48</sup>
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet discussed Ukraine on March 23, their sixth call since February 24.<sup>49</sup>

#### **China continued to protect Russia in international organizations while Western countries condemned Chinese political support for Russia and warned Beijing against supplying material support to Russia.**

- The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said that no G-20 member has the right to expel another, amid reports Western countries are considering removing Russia from the economic bloc on March 23.<sup>50</sup>
- Senior aide to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky Andriy Yermak called on March 22 for China to play a more active role in pushing Russia to end the war.<sup>51</sup>
- NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg accused China of politically supporting Russia and said on March 23 that NATO is “concerned” China could begin supplying material support soon.<sup>52</sup> However, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on March 22 that the United States still had no evidence that China was sending military equipment to Russia.<sup>53</sup>



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