

Ukraine

INVASION UPDATE

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

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The Ukraine Invasion Update is a weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from April 15-21. All of the ISW 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 April 15-21

- **Russia and Ukraine are unlikely to resume negotiations in the coming weeks. Both sides await the outcome of Russia's ongoing offensive in eastern Ukraine. Kyiv likely assesses that its military has the potential to push Russian forces back to their pre-February 24 positions and is unlikely to engage in negotiations until that outcome occurs or becomes significantly less likely.**
- **The Kremlin is increasingly describing the war in Ukraine as a war with NATO to the domestic Russian audience to explain slower-than-intended operations and mounting casualties.**
- **The Kremlin likely intends to create one or more proxy states in occupied southern Ukraine to cement its military occupation and set conditions to demand permanent control over these regions.**
- **Russian and Belarusian officials seek to frame Western sanctions as predominantly harming European economies while playing up the efficacy of their sanction-mitigation efforts.**
- **The Kremlin is failing to deter NATO expansion and failing to disrupt Ukraine's military alignment with the West.**
- **The Kremlin remains unlikely to use a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine in this phase of the war.**

Key Events April 15-21

Negotiations:

Russia and Ukraine are unlikely to resume negotiations in the coming weeks. Both sides await the outcome of Russia’s ongoing offensive in eastern Ukraine as they attempt to build leverage for future negotiations.¹ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced that the second phase of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine began on April 19 and that its objective is the “complete liberation” of the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, which are claimed by Russia’s proxies in eastern Ukraine.² Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on April 17 that he “[doesn’t] trust the Russian military and Russian leadership” to not attempt to take Kyiv again if they win the battle for eastern Ukraine and re-emphasized that Ukraine is unwilling to give up its territory to end the war.³

Growing reports of Russian atrocities are bolstering Ukraine’s political will to fight and make the resumption of higher-level negotiations increasingly unlikely. Zelensky told CNN on April 17 that “there comes a time when no one wants to talk. Our society does not want us to continue negotiations.” Zelensky emphasized the link between Russian atrocities in Bucha, Volnovakha, Borodyanka, and Mariupol and Ukraine’s unwillingness to negotiate. Ukrainian negotiator Mykhailo Podolyak said on April 20 that Russian atrocities against Ukrainian civilians make it difficult for Ukraine to approach negotiations “unemotionally.”⁴ Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba emphasized on April 17 that the “only level of contact” between Russia and Ukraine is the negotiating team made up of parliamentarians and “representatives of various institutions.”⁵ Kuleba warned that Mariupol may become a “red line” for Ukraine if Russian forces kill the remaining Ukrainian defenders in the city. Zelensky said the Kremlin rejected a Ukrainian proposal to hold a “special round of negotiations” with Russia to arrange the evacuation of remaining civilians and defenders from Mariupol on April 20.⁶

The Kremlin claims that Ukraine is sabotaging the peace negotiations, likely to justify Russia’s continuing invasion to its domestic population. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said on April 18 that “unfortunately, the Ukrainian side is not demonstrating much consistency on agreed-upon issues. Their position is changing frequently.”⁷ Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said on April 20 that “there is no trust” in the negotiations, which she described as an inconsistent “circus.”⁸ Zakharova implied that the West is controlling the Ukrainian government and that Kyiv cannot negotiate on its own behalf. She also described negotiations as a “diversionary maneuver” by Kyiv.

Kremlin Narratives

The Kremlin continued to reframe its invasion of Ukraine as a war of Western aggression against Russia to justify its ongoing invasion—and mounting casualties—to the Russian domestic audience. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on April 20 that the United States and NATO are “handling processes” in Ukraine and that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky “cannot be viewed as an independent politician.”⁹ Zakharova claimed on April 19 that the United States has been preparing to “incite” aggression in eastern Ukraine for eight years.¹⁰

Russian State Duma Committee on International Affairs Chairman Leonid Slutsky accused the United States and the United Kingdom of using Ukraine as a “springboard” to justify further confrontation with Russia on April 17.¹¹ Russian Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin falsely claimed on April 15 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confessed to intentionally setting conditions to start a war with Russia by purchasing arms and attempting to join NATO prior to Russia’s invasion, reiterating the longstanding Kremlin claim that all Ukrainian arms purchases are inherently offensive toward Russia.¹² Zakharova claimed on April 20 that NATO trained foreign and Ukrainian “neo-Nazis” to use civilians as human shields and to torture prisoners with suspected pro-Russian sympathies.¹³ Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev framed foreign volunteers in Ukraine as Western Nazi mercenaries fighting for money on April 19 and warned that they too would be subject to “denazification” when captured.¹⁴ The Investigative Committee of Russia claimed that Western states had armed and prepared Ukrainian forces for war with Russia on April 20.¹⁵ The Kremlin likely seeks to more easily explain Russian military losses to the Russian population by downplaying Ukrainian autonomy and framing the war as being conducted against NATO.

The Kremlin continues to falsely blame Ukrainian forces for planning or conducting “provocations” in areas where Russian forces intend to commit or have already committed atrocities. The Kremlin likely seeks to introduce doubt into future attributions of war crimes and to diminish global support for Ukraine by blaming Ukrainian forces for crimes already committed by Russian forces. The Kremlin likely also intends to negatively portray Ukrainian forces to the Russian population to maintain domestic support for the invasion.

- Russian officials claimed on April 15 that Ukrainian forces regularly use civilians as human shields and that Ukrainian forces plan to carry out an attack on the Lozova train station in Kharkiv Oblast to provoke retaliation from Russia.¹⁶ Russian forces conducted a missile attack on a refugee-filled train station in Kramatorsk and blamed Ukrainian forces on April 8.¹⁷
- The Russian proxy Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) claimed on April 15 that Ukrainian special forces intended to stage a terror attack on an April 16 rally in the city of Luhansk.¹⁸ LNR officials claimed that Ukrainian forces organized the rally. No such attack took place.
- Russia’s Ministry of Defense claimed on April 19 that Ukrainian forces were planning several independent attacks on civilians across Ukraine including shooting civilians that surrender in Mariupol; shelling civilians in Zaporizhia, Odesa, Sumy, and Kharkiv Oblasts; and executing Russian civilians in Odesa.¹⁹ Such false claims indicate that Russian forces may have killed civilians in some named areas and intend to blame Ukraine for their deaths. No fighting has taken place in Odesa since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24; the Kremlin likely intends claims regarding Odesa to further Kremlin claims of a Ukrainian genocide against Russians.
- Russian First Deputy Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyansky claimed that Russian forces did not know there were civilians in the Azovstal steel plant prior to April 18 and argued that “radicals and Neo-Nazis” placed civilians in the plant to be used as human shields on April 19.²⁰
- The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed on April 20 that Ukrainian “neo-Nazis” have been using schools in Kherson as headquarters since February 24.²¹ The Kremlin will likely amplify any reports of Ukrainian forces operating near civilian infrastructure to justify Russian targeting of Ukrainian civilians.
- The LNR claimed on April 20 and 21 that Ukrainian nationalists are planning to attack churches with Tochka-U missiles along the frontlines near Dnepropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, and Kharkiv on April 24, Orthodox Easter.²²

- Ukraine’s Odesa Regional Military Administration Spokesperson Sergei Bratchuk claimed on April 18 that Russian forces are planning to strike at Kherson with multiple rocket launchers as part of a false flag operation to justify an upcoming Russian “referendum” to create a Kherson People’s Republic.²³

The Kremlin remains unlikely to use a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine during this phase of the war. The Kremlin likely assesses that the use of a nuclear weapon would trigger greater NATO involvement in the war, making the Russian use of a nuclear weapon a net loss for Russia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov denied that Russia would use nuclear weapons in Ukraine and claimed that Russia is only considering using conventional weapons in statements on April 19 that Kremlin-run media outlets subsequently heavily promoted.²⁴ Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said on April 20 that Russian law enforcement should investigate anyone who spreads disinformation about Russia considering the use of nuclear weapons and reiterated Lavrov’s statement that Russia will only use conventional weapons in Ukraine.²⁵ State-run media outlets circulating her statement emphasized Russia’s signatory status on nuclear control treaties.²⁶ Two US officials “familiar with recent intelligence assessments” told CNN on April 20 that the United States has not seen any indicators of Russian preparations to use nuclear weapons.²⁷ The United States and its allies would almost certainly publicly warn of any indicators that the Kremlin was preparing to use a nuclear weapon in Ukraine. The Kremlin likely seeks to avoid such a massive escalation that would likely lead to direct NATO involvement and instead seeks to frame itself as nonaggressive. The Kremlin will likely rely on conventional and possibly chemical weapons capabilities to achieve its objectives in Donbas. While we cannot completely rule out the Russian use of a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine, the Kremlin is highly unlikely to use one during this phase of the war.

Russian Domestic Opposition and Censorship

Kremlin censorship of Russian and international media seeks to maintain its narrative that Russian forces are only targeting Ukrainian military personnel and key strategic infrastructure, not Ukrainian civilians. Russian state censorship body Roskomnadzor further restricted access to independent publications and international coverage of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the past week.²⁸ Roskomnadzor is particularly targeting international reports of Russian war crimes, as such reporting could undermine the Kremlin’s false framing that Ukraine is responsible for all civilian deaths in Ukraine. The Kremlin has likely ordered intimidation tactics to be used against opposition journalists, activists, and concerned citizens within Russia to deter any realistic coverage of the Russian invasion.²⁹ The Russian Ministry of Defense classified information on the relatives of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine on April 20 (which was previously available through civilian institutions due to the families of deceased personnel receiving state benefits), citing security risks.³⁰ Limiting the publication of such data will enable the Kremlin to disguise the full scope of Russian losses from the Russian public.

Russian Reactions to Sanctions:

Russian and Belarusian officials seek to frame Western sanctions as predominantly harming European economies while playing up the efficacy of their sanctions mitigation efforts. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed on April 18 that the “economic blitzkrieg” of

Western sanctions failed to destabilize the Russian economy.³¹ Putin additionally claimed that anti-Russian sanctions have caused a decline in the standard of living throughout Europe.³² Russian Security Council Deputy Head Dmitry Medvedev claimed on April 16 that Western sanctions against Russia could cause hyperinflation in Europe and an influx of Ukrainian refugees would cause a “crime wave.”³³ European Commission Head Ursula von der Leyen stated on April 17 that the Russian state’s bankruptcy is only “a matter of time.”³⁴ Both Russia and Belarus continued to frame sanctions as opportunities for their economies. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin asserted on April 16 that sanctions provide a “window of opportunity” for Russia’s youth to “rebuild and find new ways of development.”³⁵ Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko stated on April 16 that Belarus has taken “systemic” measures to reduce inflation including introducing state-regulated prices for non-food items for the first time.³⁶

Belarus:

N/A

Russian Occupation:

The Kremlin likely intends to create one or more proxy states in occupied southern Ukraine to cement its military occupation and set conditions to demand permanent control over these regions. Russian proxy Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin claimed on April 20 that residents of the Russian-occupied Rozovsky district in Ukraine’s Zaporizhia Oblast independently convened a meeting and voted unanimously to join the DNR.³⁷ Residents were likely forced to hold such a meeting; ISW could not confirm the location or participants in videos of the meeting. Ukrainian military sources reported on April 21 that Russian forces are preparing to conduct a “referendum” to create a “Kherson People’s Republic” on April 27.³⁸ The Kremlin will likely conduct additional “referendums” in occupied parts of eastern Ukraine to set conditions to annex more of the country, either into Russia or into its preexisting proxies. The Kremlin will likely use such faux republics to appoint Russian proxy leadership and will use those structures to forcibly mobilize or otherwise exploit local populations. Ukrainian intelligence claimed on April 20 that the Kremlin is planning to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian men from both Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts to fight for Russia.³⁹ Russia has already begun to create a heavily pro-Russia information environment in occupied parts of Ukraine, limiting Ukrainian media in favor of Russian outlets and broadcasts.⁴⁰

The Kremlin may be recruiting additional mercenaries to fight in eastern Ukraine and reportedly already has as many as 20,000 mercenaries (both Russian and international) in eastern Ukraine. An anonymous European official told *The Kyiv Post* on April 19 that Russia has between 10,000 and 20,000 mercenaries from Syria, Libya, and the Russian private military company Wagner Group fighting on its behalf in eastern Ukraine.⁴¹ The official said that the mercenaries are predominantly infantry. The majority of these mercenaries are likely Russian, and the Ukrainian government reported that at most several hundred Libyan mercenaries are engaged in fighting around Popasna in eastern Ukraine.⁴² Meanwhile, hundreds of Ethiopians queued in front of the Russian Embassy in Addis Ababa on April 19.⁴³ The Russian Embassy denied allegations, circulated by Ukrainian outlets, that it was recruiting Ethiopian mercenaries to fight in Ukraine.⁴⁴

Drivers of Russian Threat Perceptions:

The Kremlin is failing to deter NATO expansion and failing to disrupt Ukraine's military alignment with the West. Russian Ambassador-at-Large and Chairman of the Committee of Senior Officials of the Arctic Council Nikolai Korchunov warned Sweden and Finland against joining NATO on April 17 and claimed that the expansion of NATO would be to the detriment of “traditionally non-aligned blocs” by leading to mutual distrust.⁴⁵ Finland’s parliament debated its accession to NATO on April 20 and will likely ask to join the alliance in the coming weeks.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, US and Western military support continued to reach Ukraine’s armed forces to bolster their operations in Donbas, demonstrating the continued efficacy of the pro-Ukraine coalition. Russia issued a diplomatic demarche after US President Joe Biden announced an \$800 million security package on April 14, claiming that US and NATO weapons shipments to Ukraine were worsening the war and would bring about “unpredictable consequences.”⁴⁷ The US security package arrived in Ukraine on April 18.⁴⁸ Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said that the aid package included aircraft parts that will enable the recommissioning of about 20 Ukrainian aircraft.⁴⁹ The United States announced a second \$800 million security package on April 21 that includes 72 howitzers with accompanying vehicles and 440,000 rounds of ammunition; over 121 Phoenix Ghost Tactical Unmanned Aerial Systems tailored to Ukraine’s needs; and various field equipment and spare parts.⁵⁰ A senior US defense official told *Reuters* on April 20 that the United States has resumed training small numbers of Ukrainians on the use of the new artillery.⁵¹ The weeklong trainings will take place outside Ukraine, likely in Poland.

European states also promised additional aid:

- Finland announced on April 21 that it will send unspecified additional defense material to Ukraine.⁵²
- German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock announced that Germany would provide artillery training and maintenance to Ukraine on April 20.⁵³ She added that Germany had delivered anti-tank weapons, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, and “other things that [they] didn’t talk about in public.”⁵⁴
- Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederikson announced Denmark will more than double its current military aid to Ukraine during her April 21 trip to Ukraine. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced that Spain will send 200 tons of ammunition and other military supplies during the same trip.⁵⁵

Foreign Involvement:

N/A



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