

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	690
Land:	Rusland
Kilde:	Institute for the Study of War and the Critical Threats Project
Titel:	Ukraine invasion update
Udgivet:	30. marts 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	2. maj 2022

Ukraine

INVASION UPDATE

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

March 30

The 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 25-29. 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 March 25-29

- **The Kremlin is falsely presenting its partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Kyiv and Chernihiv as a major Russian concession in service of peace talks with Ukraine. In reality, Russian forces are withdrawing to recuperate after suffering severe losses in their failed operations to seize those cities.**
- **Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko continues to withstand Russian pressure to enter the war in Ukraine on Russia's behalf.**
- **The Kremlin is intensifying its internal censorship and crackdown on entities in Russia that do not cover the war in the Kremlin's preferred terms.**
- **The Kremlin denied reports of increased conscription on March 26 but is likely beginning a broader mobilization that will coincide with Russia's annual spring conscription on April 1. These new conscription drives are unlikely to generate effective Russian combat power for many months, at the earliest.**
- **The Kremlin maintained its defamatory narratives about claimed US involvement in Ukrainian biolaboratories and Russian nuclear capabilities to discredit and intimidate the West.**
- **The Kremlin continued to downplay the effects of Western sanctions on the Russian economy and threatened the West with counter-sanctions leveraging Russian energy exports.**

Key Events March 25-29

Negotiations:

Russian and Ukrainian negotiators met in Istanbul, Turkey, on March 29 as part of ongoing peace talks. The Kremlin is falsely framing the withdrawal of its forces that failed to capture Kyiv as a Russian concession. Kremlin rhetoric following the meeting was more open to further discussion and Ukrainian demands than throughout the first month of the invasion, but the Kremlin likely retains its maximalist objectives in Ukraine, and peace talks are unlikely to progress in the near future.

- **The Kremlin's claimed withdrawal of forces around Kyiv, which it seeks to portray as a “huge step” towards peace, is a cover for an ongoing redeployment of Russian forces after their failure to take Kyiv.** Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel-General Alexander Fomin claimed on March 29 that Russia will “drastically reduce military activity in the Kyiv and Chernihiv directions” and provide details on Russia’s claimed withdrawal later this week.¹ Chief Russian negotiator Vladimir Medinsky falsely framed this claimed withdrawal as a “huge step” toward peace that requires “counter-movement” from Ukraine.² The Kremlin is attempting to falsely portray the failure of its campaign to encircle Kyiv, which ISW assessed had failed as of March 19, as an olive branch requiring a Ukrainian concession.³ Russian forces continue to fight to hold their front-line trace near the city, and Russian forces have been withdrawing into Belarus for rest and refit for several days – prior to the Russian announcement on March 29.⁴ Russia’s redeployment of forces to other fronts and continued shelling around Kyiv are not concessions and should not be treated as such by Ukraine and its partners.
- **Kyiv remained firm that Ukraine must receive separate security guarantees if it abandons its NATO aspirations.** Ukrainian officials called for the establishment of a security guarantee system for Ukraine (involving Russia, China, the United States, Germany, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and France) if Ukraine drops its NATO aspirations.⁵ None of those countries have publicly committed to such a system and are unlikely to do so; Kyiv will therefore likely refuse Russian demands to commit to not joining NATO.
- **Ukraine's delegation offered possible limited concessions on territorial control but stated all Russian forces must withdraw prior to any territorial negotiations.** Ukraine’s delegation presented an agreement stating Ukraine would not join NATO, would adopt a neutral status, and would not host foreign forces if Russia provided security guarantees and withdrew all its forces from Ukraine. Ukraine also offered a fifteen-year negotiation period on the future of the Russian-occupied Crimean Peninsula.⁶ Zelensky emphasized in a March 27 interview with Russian media that Russia should return its forces to the positions they held before the February 24 invasion prior to any dialogue on control over the Donbas.⁷ Zelensky left open the possibility of conceding parts of eastern Ukraine, emphasizing that “Ukrainian land is important, yes, but ultimately, it's just a territory,” but also said that Ukraine would not compromise Ukrainian territory without “iron-clad” security guarantees.⁸ Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak said on March 29 that Ukraine will sign an international agreement on security guarantees only after holding a national referendum on the issue.
- **The Kremlin said Ukraine’s proposal was “clearly formulated” after previously falsely claiming Kyiv refused to provide a firm position and stated the Kremlin will consider Kyiv’s proposal before responding.** Medinsky stated on March 29 that Russia proposed to “expedite” plans to schedule a meeting between Zelensky and Putin to occur prior to the conclusion of negotiations.⁹ Medinsky stated Russia’s delegation will pass Ukraine’s “clearly formulated position” to President Putin, after which Moscow will give a response, but did not specify a timeline for further meetings.

Russian Domestic Opposition and Censorship:

Kremlin crackdowns on coverage of the war are increasingly prompting self-censorship among Russia's few remaining independent outlets. The Russian Investigative Committee announced it is investigating more than 10 criminal cases of “fakes about the Russian army” as of March 25.¹⁰ Russian authorities continue to arrest individuals Russian President Vladimir Putin deemed “scum and traitors” for sharing what the Kremlin claims is false information about the war.¹¹ Russian state censorship is increasingly prompting self-censorship by Russian media outlets. Russian media censor Roskomnadzor demanded on March 27 that Russian media refuse to publish interviews with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.¹² Leading independent Russian news outlet *Novaya Gazeta* announced on March 28 that it is suspending operations until after the war following warnings from Roskomnadzor.¹³

Ukrainian reporting successfully forced the Kremlin to respond to rumors about the absence of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu from Kremlin broadcasts and reports. Shoigu reappeared in a Kremlin-published video on March 26 following a two-week absence.¹⁴ Ukrainian Internal Affairs Minister Adviser Anton Gerashchenko claimed on March 26 that Shoigu's condition has deteriorated following a heart attack at an unspecified date and that the March 26 video was previously recorded on March 11, though ISW cannot independently verify this claim.¹⁵ Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov has also not appeared in public for several weeks.

Kremlin Narratives:

The Kremlin denied reports of increased conscription on March 26 but is likely beginning a broader mobilization.¹⁶ Russia's Defense Ministry denied claims on March 26 that it is calling Russian reservists to military enlistment offices and instead claimed that Ukrainian intelligence is issuing fake calls imitating Russian officials.¹⁷ Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated on March 28 that Russia will begin conscription through the BARS-2021 (Combat Army Reserve of the Country) program on April 1, 2022, alongside the normal semi-annual conscription cycle on April 1 to “conceal mass mobilization measures.”¹⁸ Such a recruitment drive would be unlikely to provide Russian forces around Ukraine with sufficient combat power to restart major offensive operations in the near term. Russia's pool of available well-trained replacements remains low, and new conscripts will require months to reach even a minimum standard of readiness.

The Kremlin continues to advance information operations seeking to discredit the US government's cooperation with Ukraine, claiming it is conducting an “investigation” into what it claims are US-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine that could be used to conduct chemical attacks. Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov stated on March 25 that Russia will continue to investigate what it claims are US-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine.¹⁹ The Russian State Duma's Deputy Chair of CIS Affairs Viktor Vodolatsky announced on March 26 that Russia planned to present the results of its investigation into alleged US-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine to the United Nations.²⁰ Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev stated on March 29 that the United States must explain its financing of alleged Ukrainian biolaboratories.²¹ Patrushev also falsely accused the United States of developing bioweapons that can selectively target specific populations on March 29.²²

Peskov claimed that US reports of Russia's use of banned munitions are attempts to divert attention from US-funded biolaboratories in Ukraine.²³ The Donetsk People's Republic denied claims on March 26 that Russian forces used white phosphorous munitions in Ukraine.²⁴ *Izvestiya* correspondent Lenoid Kitarr claimed on March 26 to have visited the Chernobyl laboratory for the study of radioactive waste and alleged that Ukrainian workers confiscated important documents before abandoning the facility.²⁵

Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev outlined the conditions under which Russia would use nuclear weapons on March 26 in an effort to intimidate the west.²⁶ Medvedev's stated conditions were: the use of nuclear weapons against Russia or its allies; an attack on Russian critical infrastructure that paralyzes their nuclear response forces; or an act of aggression against Russia or its allies that threatens the existence of the state. The Kremlin is leaving the extent of what it considers an existential threat to Russia or its allies (notably including Belarus) intentionally ambiguous. Medvedev separately noted that the 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, later extended by Russian President Vladimir Putin, is subject to a unique clause wherein "international treaties are only valid as long as the circumstances that gave rise to them exist," and that those circumstances have disappeared, implying that Russia is no longer obligated to follow the treaty.²⁷

Russian Reactions to Sanctions:

The Kremlin continues to claim it can weather the effect of Western sanctions and promised to implement counter-sanctions that will further isolate Russia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated on March 28 that Russia will create a package of countermeasures in response to unfriendly US actions. Lavrov also stated that Russia will restrict entry into Russia from "unfriendly states."²⁸ Russian Industry and Trade Minister Denis Maturov claimed on March 27 that Russia will rebuild all of its supply chains within 3-6 months, which is highly unlikely.²⁹ Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law providing income tax breaks from 2021 to 2023 on March 26 to mitigate the impacts of sanctions.³⁰ Russia also banned foreigners from withdrawing funds from the Russian financial system on March 25.³¹ Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev stated on March 25 that the West's "stupid sanctions" are strengthening domestic support for the Kremlin.³² Lavrov stated on March 25 that most states will not join the West's sanction "games" and accused the West of launching a "hybrid, total war" with sanctions.³³ The Kremlin remains focused on downplaying the effect of sanctions for a domestic audience but is unlikely to mitigate the damage to its economy.

Belarus:

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko continues to withstand Russian pressure to enter the war in Ukraine on Russia's behalf. Lukashenko reiterated on March 25 that he does not have "plans to fight in Ukraine" and that Belarusian citizens "do not accept war at a genetic level."³⁴ However, Belarus continues to logistically support Russia's military operation. The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs announced on March 26 that any Belarusian citizens who fight against Russia in Ukraine or who sabotage Belarusian infrastructure will face terrorism charges. The ministry additionally blamed Belarusian opposition leaders for coordinating a "criminal" foreign battalion - a reference to a pro-Ukrainian Belarusian volunteer unit that is operating in Ukraine.³⁵

Russian Occupation:

The Kremlin is intensifying efforts to establish a formal military regime in occupied areas of Ukraine and is kidnapping Ukrainian citizens in a likely attempt to reduce Ukrainian resistance and use civilians as hostages in future negotiations. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry stated on March 29 that Russian forces have kidnapped nearly 30 Ukrainian officials, activists, and journalists and forcibly deported over 40,000 Ukrainian citizens to Belarus and Russia.³⁶ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov denied this report and improbably claimed Russia has no data on Russian arrests of Ukrainian officials.³⁷ Russian forces are additionally increasing steps to establish an occupation regime in Ukraine. The Kremlin's United Russia party opened an office on the outskirts of Mariupol on March 25 to disseminate party newspapers, propaganda, and

cellphone SIM cards.³⁸ Russia's Deputy Prime Minister for Crimea Georgy Muradov announced the formation of civil-military administrations in occupied southern Ukraine on March 26 and claimed Russian TV channels are broadcasting in Kherson and south of Zaporizhzhia.³⁹

Drivers of Russian Threat Perceptions:

Kremlin officials claimed US President Joe Biden's March 26 statement in Poland that Russian President Vladimir Putin "cannot remain in power" demonstrates the US has no interest in diplomacy. The White House later clarified that "the president's point was that Putin cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbors or the region" and was not calling for regime change in Russia.⁴⁰ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on March 26 that Biden's comments about Putin "narrow the window of opportunity" for bilateral relations.⁴¹ Russian media additionally mischaracterized Biden's statements to claim the US will deploy US forces to Ukraine.⁴²

The Kremlin is attempting to leverage its energy exports to Europe to prop up the ruble as Western restrictions on Russian energy exports erode this Russian economic lifeline. The United States and the European Commission (EC) announced a new task force on March 25 to supply Europe with 15 billion cubic meters of US liquified gas to wean European nations off of their reliance on Russian fuel.⁴³ EU Foreign Affairs and Security Policy High Representative Josep Borell stated on March 28 that the EU plans to abandon the Russian gas market within two years.⁴⁴ Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded that European importers pay for Russian energy in rubles on March 23, a direct attempt to restore the value of the ruble and mitigate the effect of international sanctions.⁴⁵ G7 energy ministers rejected Putin's demands to pay for Russian gas with rubles on March 28, citing breaches in existing gas import contracts.⁴⁶ Separately, Ukraine is likely attempting to limit the willingness of states to import Russian energy. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called on Qatari energy producers to increase their exports to Europe to undercut Russia's efforts to put pressure on European markets through an energy crisis on March 26.⁴⁷

NATO and EU countries continue to provide lethal and non-lethal military aid to Ukraine and bordering NATO countries and increased defense measures to counter Russian aggression.

- Sweden announced on March 25 that it will increase its defense spending by \$300 million to provide support to Ukraine.⁴⁸
- Estonian president Alar Karis called for a permanent NATO presence on the eastern border on March 28.⁴⁹
- The US Department of Defense deployed six Navy electronic warfare aircraft and 240 troops to Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany to reinforce NATO's eastern flank on March 28.⁵⁰
- US President Joe Biden's new 2023 budget proposal includes \$6.9 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative and for NATO to counter Russian aggression.⁵¹
- Abkhazia's military reportedly moved to high-readiness status in response to NATO exercises in Georgia on March 27.⁵²

Foreign Involvement:

N/A



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