



News Brief Update 54

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Contact: Dr. Ian Davis
Email: idavis@natowatch.org
www.natowatch.org

Russia's war with Ukraine (Update covering the period 1-31 December)

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For developments in NATO: see the separate *NATO Watch Observatory No.60 (forthcoming)*

Overview

At the end of 2023 the leaders of Ukraine and Russia struck a [defiant tone](#) and vowed to reach their military goals as the war headed towards its third year. Speaking in Kyiv during a press conference on 19 December, President Zelensky sought to improve the domestic mood and maintain western support that had been faltering in recent weeks. Kyiv's two biggest allies, the United States and the EU, [failed to approve](#) two separate support packages. The EU, however, delivered a political boost by [agreeing](#) on 14 December to open formal membership talks with Ukraine.

"I am certain US and European financial support will continue," Zelensky [said](#). "I'm confident the US won't betray us". Meanwhile, in Moscow, President Putin [told](#) defence officials that in Ukraine he would "not give up what is ours", while claiming the Russian military had momentum. "Our troops are holding the initiative," Putin said, during the end-of-year meeting with his defence leadership. "We are effectively doing what we think is needed, doing what we want".

Russian and Ukrainian military officials both reported downing enemy aircraft over the Christmas period. President Zelensky warned Russian pilots that Ukraine's air defence will "only get stronger" after Ukraine said it shot down five Russian combat aircraft in the days before Christmas, including [three Russian Su-34 fighter-bomber aircraft](#) on the southern front on 22 December, probably by US-supplied Patriot missiles. "In just one evening yesterday, our warriors shot down almost 30

Shahed drones, a few missiles, and two military aircraft. Five in a week. I am grateful to everyone who ensured such a powerful result”, he [said](#) in his Christmas message. Meanwhile, Russia’s Defence Ministry [said](#) earlier that its air defence systems had shot down four Ukrainian military aircraft: three Su-27 fighter aircraft and one Su-24 tactical bomber in the Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk regions of southeastern Ukraine.

Overall, however, the two sides have largely fallen into an operational deadlock. The Ukrainian summer-autumn counteroffensive failed to regain much ground, while the Russians also lack the ability to launch a large-scale offensive. Local battles of a tactical nature are being fought along the entire 1,000km frontline, with little chance of a breakthrough. In this grinding war of attrition, casualties, destruction and collateral damage have reached proportions not seen in Europe since World War II. Despite the bloody stalemate and a growing war weariness, diplomacy to end the war remains stalled.

Ukraine on the back foot despite huge Russian losses

Ukraine’s armed forces have [reportedly](#) taken up a more defensive posture after their summer counteroffensive failed to achieve a major breakthrough. The head of Ukraine’s armed forces Gen Valerii Zaluzhnyi [said](#) on 26 December, the war in 2024 “must be different from 2023”. “Otherwise, we will face what I wrote about in the article [the Economist]”, he said (see NATO Watch [Update 53](#)). “Unfortunately, I must state that the enemy is not far behind us. In recent days, we have had a powerful confrontation applying modern technologies. But we do not spare efforts. My main mistake was that I thought that the amount of losses we inflicted on the enemy would stop anyone. But not the Russian Federation”, Gen Zaluzhnyi added during a press conference. He also said Ukrainian troops remained on a defensive line in the northern part of Maryinka. “But I can say that this settlement no longer exists. The [Russian]

method is the same as it was in Bakhmut. Street by street, block by block are destroyed”. “As for the conduct of hostilities around Avdiivka,” he continued, “the enemy now has the opportunity to concentrate forces; they can do to the city in two or three months what they have done to Bakhmut”.

Avdiivka, the eastern Ukrainian city that has seen some of the most intense fighting of the war, was [reported](#) on 8 December to be on the verge of “imminent collapse” to Russian forces, with Ukrainian troops “starved of ammunition”. Russia began a major offensive against Avdiivka in October and has been trying for nearly two months to encircle the industrial town in the eastern Donetsk region, suffering [huge losses](#) of infantry and armoured vehicles.

CNN [reported](#) on 13 December that Russia had lost a staggering 87% percent of the total number of active-duty ground troops it had prior to launching its invasion of Ukraine and two-thirds of its pre-invasion tanks, according to a source familiar with a declassified US intelligence assessment provided to Congress. Of the 360,000 troops that entered Ukraine, including contract and conscript personnel, Russia has lost 315,000 on the battlefield, according to the assessment. In addition, 2,200 of 3,500 tanks have been lost, and 4,400 of 13,600 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers have also been destroyed. According to the assessment Russia has been able to keep its war effort by relaxing recruitment standards and dipping into Soviet-era stockpiles of older equipment. However, the assessment found that the war has “sharply set back 15 years of Russian effort to modernize its ground force”.

President Zelensky [told](#) the Associated Press on 1 December that “winter as a whole is a new phase of war” and acknowledged that “we did not achieve the desired results” with the summer counteroffensive. The Ukrainian leader also said that “we already can see the consequences of the international community shifting [attention] because of the tragedy in the Middle East”. Meanwhile, in remarks on 14 December, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [warned](#) of a “real risk” Putin would

not stop at Ukraine, if he achieves military victory there. In an earlier [interview](#) on 2 December the Secretary General warned that NATO should be ready for bad news from Ukraine. "Wars develop in phases," Stoltenberg said with German broadcaster ARD. "We have to support Ukraine in both good and bad times," he said. "We should also be prepared for bad news," Stoltenberg added, without being more specific.

Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure

Missile and drone strikes on 29-30 December

Russia launched a [huge wave](#) of missile strikes on Ukrainian cities on 29 December, including the capital, in what Ukraine's Defence Minister Rustem Umerov called the biggest air attack of the war. At least 30 civilians were killed and 160 injured in the strikes on residential buildings in Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv and other cities in the west and south. A shopping centre and maternity hospital were hit in the central city of Dnipro, Ukrainian officials said. In Odesa, three people were killed and another 26 injured, including two children and a pregnant woman, when three rockets hit residential buildings. The Ukrainian air force [said](#) it shot down 87 cruise missiles and 27 drones of a total 158 aerial "targets" fired by Russia. Umerov said it involved 18 strategic bombers, while the army chief, Gen Valerii Zaluzhnyi, said infrastructure and industrial and military facilities had been targeted. President Zelensky [said](#) Russia launched about 110 missiles in the attack. "Today, Russia used nearly every type of weapon in its arsenal," he said on social media. "Russian terror must and will lose".

The next day, on 30 December, Russia launched another [bombardment](#) targeting Kyiv and inflicting damage on residential areas of the city of Kharkiv, Ukrainian officials said. Ukraine's air defence systems in the region surrounding Kyiv were engaged in repelling Russia's drone attack, the military administration of the region said. The Kharkiv mayor, Ihor Terekhov, said the drone attack came in several waves, hitting residential

buildings in the city centre and starting fires. "All relevant emergency services are already on the site. Information about potential casualties is being clarified".

During the wave of missile strikes on 29 December, Poland's armed forces [said](#) an unknown airborne object, which they identified as a Russian missile, entered the country's airspace from the direction of Ukraine for less than three minutes. "It was monitored by us on radars and left the airspace," said Poland's defence chief, Gen Wiesław Kukuła. The object penetrated about 40km, Poland said, adding that NATO radar also confirmed the object left Polish airspace. The Russian charge d'affaires in Poland, Andrei Ordash, [said](#) "Until hard evidence is provided, we will not give any explanations, because these accusations are unfounded".

At a hastily convened meeting of the UN Security Council, most Council members – including the US, France and Britain – condemned the attacks. "Tragically, 2023 is ending as it began, with devastating violence against the people of Ukraine," UN assistant secretary general Khaled Khiri [said](#) after briefing the Council on the attacks.

The intensity of the air war

Russia has launched about 7,400 missiles and 3,700 Shahed attack drones at targets in Ukraine during its 22-month-old invasion, Kyiv [said](#) on 21 December, illustrating the vast scale of Moscow's aerial assaults. Ukrainian air defences were able to shoot down 1,600 of the missiles and 2,900 of the drones, air force spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat said in televised comments. The intensive use of armed drones by both sides in the conflict has been a significant feature of the war, and this drone war seemingly intensified in November and December.

Russian drone, missile and artillery attacks on civilian infrastructure continued in December. For example, Russian attacks on southern Ukraine's Kherson region killed at least six civilians on 23-24 December, Ukrainian officials [said](#). Regional police said three people died in shelling of an apartment building and a

private home in Kherson city. A woman died in a drone attack in a small town south of Kherson and a second woman was killed when a town farther north came under heavy fire. Russian forces also [shelled](#) a power station closer to the frontlines in eastern Ukraine, injuring five workers and knocking out electricity to the town of Kurakhovo.

Cyber-attack on Ukraine's mobile network

On 12 December Ukraine's biggest mobile network operator, Kyivstar, was hit by what appeared to be the biggest cyber-attack of the war with Russia so far, knocking out mobile and internet services for more than half the population. Ukraine officials said Russia was behind the attack. Kyivstar CEO Oleksandr Komarov [said](#) that voice services to some clients were restored the next day after what he called "the biggest cyber-attack on telco infrastructure in the world". The cyber-attack also affected the air raid alert system in more than 75 settlements in the Kyiv region, the regional military administration said. A hacking group believed by Kyiv to be affiliated with Russian military intelligence [claimed](#) responsibility for the cyber-attack. A group of activist hackers, or "hacktivists", called Solntsepyok said in a post on the Telegram messaging app that it carried out the cyber-attack, and published screenshots appearing to show that the hackers had accessed Kyivstar's servers.

Ukrainian attacks inside Russia and in Russian-occupied Ukraine

Kyiv has launched increasingly frequent drone and missile attacks on targets in southern Russia, Moscow and in Russia-annexed Crimea (see NATIO Watch Updates 47-53). These attacks, far beyond the frontlines, appear to be escalating and are regarded as powerful propaganda for Ukraine. A November [report](#) by ACLED indicated that cross-border violence between Ukraine and Russia escalated in May-October 2023. The analysis found that conflict incidents inside Russia have become increasingly deadly for both civilians and the Russian military, and that local authorities —

especially those in the border regions — are struggling to fend off cross-border attacks.

Ukraine carried out a series of strikes on the Russian border city of Belgorod on 30 December. Russian officials [said](#) the shelling in the centre of Belgorod on Saturday killed 21 people, including three children, and injured 110 more. Ukrainian media — citing law enforcement agencies — said the attacks only hit military targets and were retaliation for the mass bombardment of Ukrainian cities on 29 December. A Ukrainian strike on a residential building in Belgorod on 29 December left one person dead and wounded four others, the regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov [said](#), adding that the city's water supply system was damaged. The Russian Defence Ministry said air defence systems destroyed a total of 13 missiles over the region that day. Meanwhile, the Freedom of Russia Legion, a Ukrainian-based paramilitary group of Russians who oppose Putin, [claimed responsibility](#) on 17 December for a cross-border attack a few kilometres into Russia's Belgorod region. The group said it had destroyed a platoon stronghold of Russian troops near Terebrenno village. The claim could not be verified.

The Ukrainian air force [said](#) on 26 December it struck Russia's Novochoerkassk navy ship during an air attack on Feodosia in Crimea, controlled by Russia. Ukraine said the ship was destroyed while Russia said it was damaged. Footage and photographs showed powerful explosions, fires over a port area, and burnt wreckage. Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk said the Russian landing ship Novochoerkassk was hit: "The fleet in Russia is getting smaller and smaller!" An initial fire was followed by a massive secondary explosion.

Ukrainian mobilisation reforms

In early December President Zelensky [said](#) that changes were needed to improve Ukraine's system of mobilisation as part of an overall strategy to improve the country's military position. Similarly, the Ukrainian army chief, Gen Valerii Zaluzhnyi, [said](#) on 26 December he was not satisfied with the work of military draft offices responsible for mobilising troops. His

comments came a day after Ukraine's parliament published the text of a draft law including lowering the age of men who can be mobilised to 25 from 27. President Zelensky said that the military had proposed mobilising up to half a million more Ukrainians but it was a "highly sensitive" issue that the military and government would have to discuss. Meanwhile, fighting age Ukrainian men in Estonia could be extradited to their home country and forced to join the war effort. Estonia's public broadcaster ERR [reported](#) that the Baltic nation stands ready to support Ukraine in its proposals to conscript Ukrainian men abroad for military service.

Christmas moved

Many Ukrainians [celebrated](#) Christmas Day on 25 December for the first time, after the government changed the date from the Orthodox Church observance of 7 January in a snub to Russia. The law signed by President Zelensky noted that Ukrainians wanted to "live their own life with their own traditions and holidays". It allows them to "abandon the Russian heritage of imposing Christmas celebrations on 7 January", it added. Christianity is the largest religion in Ukraine, with the Russian Orthodox Church dominating religious life until recently. Oksana Poviakel, director of a Ukrainian cultural museum in Kyiv, said: "We are separating ourselves from the neighbour who is currently trying to destroy our state, who is killing our people, destroying our homes, and burning our land".

Stalled diplomacy

President Zelensky [said](#) he discussed Ukraine's [peace formula](#) in a call with Pope Francis on 28 December "Over 80 countries are already involved in this process at the level of their representatives. And there will be more of them," Zelensky said in a post on X. Ukraine's vision for peace was set out in a [10-point peace plan](#) in November 2022, which called for the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, the withdrawal of Russian troops, the release of all prisoners, a tribunal for those responsible for the aggression and security guarantees for

Ukraine. However, the Kremlin [said](#) on 20 December that there is no current basis for peace talks between Russia and Ukraine and that Kyiv's proposed peace plan was absurd as it excluded Russia. "We really consider that the topic of negotiations is not relevant right now," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters. Similarly, President Putin during his annual end-of-the-year [press conference](#) on 14 December said "there will only be peace in Ukraine when we achieve our aims". Putin also said he was open to repairing relations with Europe and the United States but added that Russia had done nothing wrong in its invasion of Ukraine. He blamed the west for "spoiling relations" with Russia.

Earlier in December President Putin [said](#) he regretted deteriorating ties with western countries, as he accepted the credentials of two dozen new ambassadors at the Kremlin. "The times are not easy," Putin told the envoys. Addressing the new ambassador of the UK, he said "In the postwar [second world war] period and until recently, our countries were able to build relations. But the current state of things ... is well known and we should hope that the situation – in the interest of our countries and nations – will change for the better".

There is a growing body of compelling [evidence](#) showing that Russia and Ukraine were involved in serious negotiations to end the war in Ukraine soon after it started on 24 February 2022. The Russian delegation proposed ending the war if Ukraine dropped its NATO aspirations and took a neutral position, the Kyiv Post [reported](#) on 26 November. By all accounts, these negotiations, which took place in March-April 2022, were making real progress when Britain and the US told Ukrainian President Zelensky to abandon them, which he did.

Both President Zelensky and President Putin have previously expressed a willingness to negotiate an end to the war, but their positions remain so far apart that there are no real hopes of peace talks being resumed soon. There have been some negotiations on key issues, such as the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, getting grain

out of Ukraine and in organising prisoner swaps, but no Ukrainian-Russian negotiations since March-April 2022 on the big issues. A growing number of Global South powers have pushed for a negotiated settlement to end the war. Earlier this year, Brazilian President Lula da Silva called for a coalition of non-Western states to mediate peace talks (see NATO Watch [Update 47](#)), and a recent African initiative (see NATO Watch [Update 48](#)) was the first since the start of the war to hold separate face-to-face talks with both the Russian and Ukrainian leaders. There have also been [reports](#) of secret 'Track 1.5' US-Russian diplomacy.

For options of what a possible settlement for Ukraine might look like, see Cambridge University's [Ukraine Peace Settlement Project](#).

Military and financial assistance to Ukraine and Russia

Ukraine continues to rely heavily on international military and financial support from Western states. Most of the military assistance has come in the form of bilateral arms transfers, training and other support, which is being coordinated by the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which meets on an ad hoc basis and involves Ministers of Defence and senior military officials from Western-aligned states from around the world. Separately, NATO is strengthening a 2016 [Comprehensive Assistance Package](#) for Ukraine with both short-term assistance (ranging from fuel, protective equipment to portable anti-drone systems and secure communications) and longer-term support (to help modernize the Ukrainian armed forces to NATO interoperability standards and strengthen its defence and security institutions).

The United States is the [largest](#) single provider of military assistance to Ukraine, having committed roughly \$47 billion since February 2022. In comparison, the top recipient in other years, Israel, received between \$3 and \$4 billion. European and other partners have [pledged](#) about €53 billion (\$57 bn) in military

support to Ukraine, with more to come. [The EU](#) is also providing non-lethal and lethal arms through its European Peace Facility (EPF). This is the first time the EU has approved the supply of lethal weapons to a third country. To date, the EU has committed €5.6 billion in assistance.

New US announcements

The US President Joe Biden [demanded](#) Congress "step up" and overcome divisions on sending aid to Ukraine, saying the massive Russian air attack on 29 December demonstrated that the Kremlin hoped to "obliterate" the country. Biden said in a statement: "Unless Congress takes urgent action in the new year, we will not be able to continue sending the weapons and vital air defense systems Ukraine needs to protect its people. Congress must step up and act without any further delay". A few days earlier, the US [announced](#) a \$250 million military aid package, the last remaining tranche of weapons available for Ukraine under existing authorisation. (President Biden had [announced](#) on 13 December an additional \$200 million military aid package). According to the State Department it included air defence munitions and components, HIMARS ammunition, 155mm and 105mm artillery ammunition, anti-armour munitions, and over 15m rounds of ammunition. President Zelensky thanked the US, as uncertainty surrounds further aid to Kyiv. "To defend freedom and security not only in Ukraine and Europe but also in the United States, we must continue to respond to ongoing Russian aggression," he said on social media.

The US Senate will not vote on a package to provide more aid to Ukraine and bolster US border security before early next year, as Democratic and Republican negotiators continue their work, chamber leaders [said](#) on 19 December. "Our negotiators are going to be working very, very diligently over the December and January break period, and our goal is to get something done as soon as we get back," Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer told

reporters. More than 40 former top US and NATO diplomats and defence officials on 18 December [urged](#) Congress to approve new aid for Ukraine, warning that losing its war with Russia would be disastrous for Ukraine and threaten the security of the US and its allies.

President Zelensky [travelled to Washington](#) on 12 December to request more money but he faced a sceptical reception from key Republican lawmakers. Mike Johnson, the speaker of the House of Representatives, would not agree to support Biden's request to give Ukraine \$61.4 billion, with objectors insisting on White House concessions on border security as a condition for a deal. Republicans in the US Senate on 6 December [blocked](#) a supplemental funding bill that included financial aid for Ukraine. The [failed vote 49-51](#). Before the vote, President Biden had [pleaded](#) with Republicans, warning that a victory for Russia over Ukraine would leave Moscow in position to attack NATO allies and could draw US troops into a war. "If [Russian President] Putin takes Ukraine, he won't stop there," Biden said. Putin would attack a NATO ally, he predicted, and then "we'll have something that we don't seek and that we don't have today: American troops fighting Russian troops," Biden said. "We can't let Putin win," he said. Russia's ambassador to the United States described Biden's words as "unacceptable", while a former British Ambassador to Russia [described](#) them as 'scaremongering'.

The White House had [said](#) on 4 December that it was "out of money and nearly out of time" to provide more weapons to Ukraine unless Congress acted to approve additional funding and support. The warning was issued in a letter to congressional leaders. President Biden's budget director, Shalanda Young, said in a blunt letter to Republican House speaker Mike Johnson that if military assistance dries up it would "kneecap" Kyiv's fight against the Russian invasion. Speaker Johnson said the Biden administration had "failed to substantively address any of my conference's legitimate concerns about the lack of a clear strategy in Ukraine". Johnson also repeated the Republicans' insistence on tying any

Ukraine aid to changes in US policy on the southern border with Mexico.

New European and other announcements

The UK [announced](#) on 29 December that it will send about 200 air-defence missiles to Ukraine in response to the latest wave of Russian airstrikes. Meanwhile, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal [said](#) on 22 December that Ukraine has received the last €1.5 billion tranche from the €18 billion package from the EU for 2023. "Hope for continued unwavering support from the EU," Shmyhal said on X.

The International Monetary Fund's executive board on 11 December [approved](#) a \$900 million disbursement for Ukraine from its \$15.6 billion loan programme. In addition, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on 6 December pledged \$4.5 billion to Ukraine, including \$1 billion in humanitarian aid to help support the country's recovery effort in an online summit of leading industrial nations. The \$1 billion humanitarian aid includes funding for generators and other power supplies, as well as measures to clear mines planted by Russia, the Foreign Ministry said. The remaining \$3.5 billion includes funding for credit guarantees for World Bank loans to Ukraine.

In a new book, [Poland at War](#), by Polish journalist Zbigniew Parafianowicz, it is alleged that British special forces were operating on the ground in Ukraine weeks after Russia invaded in 2022. The author is Ukraine correspondent for a daily newspaper in Warsaw and had access to political insiders and senior officials. He quotes an unnamed Polish government minister who claims to have run into British commandos in mid-March 2022 as he was travelling between Kyiv and the city of Zhytomyr.

The Maritime Capability Coalition

A new coalition led by NATO members Britain and Norway is looking to help Ukraine build a navy, something the country has largely lacked for most of its fight against Russia. (In November a 20-[nation coalition](#) was formed to boost Ukrainian air defences). [Britain](#) and

[Norway](#) announced the new initiative — called the Maritime Capability Coalition — on 11 December, and said several other allies are expected to participate. The ultimate goal, they said, is to help transform Ukraine's navy and make it more compatible with NATO. The effort is also designed to facilitate the movement of commercial ships through the Black Sea and bypass a Russian blockade, thus benefiting Kyiv's economy. In addition, the UK [said](#) on 11 December that it had delivered two mine-hunting ships to Ukraine. The mine hunters, originally HMS Grimsby and HMS Shoreham, were renamed Chernihiv and Cherkasy in Glasgow in June, and will help Ukraine to maintain a critical route for merchant shipping travelling across the Black Sea.

Supplies of combat aircraft and training

The first two countries to agree to supply combat aircraft to Ukraine (other than F-16s) were Poland and Slovakia (see NATO Watch [Update 46](#)). Since then, the focus has been on the supply of F-16s and the training of pilots (see NATO Watch [Update 50](#)). The Netherlands and Denmark [announced](#) in August that they will donate up to 61 F-16 combat aircraft between them to Ukraine once pilot training has been satisfactorily completed. The Netherlands [sent](#) its first five F-16 aircraft to Romania on 7 November and [announced](#) on 22 December that it will send 18 F-16 jets to Ukraine. Belgium Defence Minister Ludvine Dedonder [said](#) on 11 October that his country will send F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine from 2025. There is a 13-country international coalition that will train Ukrainian pilots (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, UK and USA). The US has [indicated](#) that it could have the first Ukrainian pilots trained on F-16s before the end of the year, though it will be longer than that before they are flying combat missions. Sweden is also [reported](#) to be considering supplying Ukraine with Gripen combat aircraft. The Swedish Defence Ministry [said](#) on 6 October it could contribute the aircraft to the Western coalition supplying aircraft to Ukraine — but only after Sweden is allowed into NATO.

Support for Ukraine's defence sector

Kyiv plans to produce a million FPV (first-person-view) drones, widely in demand on the frontline, and more than 11,000 medium- and long-range attack drones next year, Ukraine's minister for strategic industries [said](#) on 20 December. "All production facilities are ready, and contracting for 2024 begins," Oleksandr Kamyshin, the minister, said on Telegram messenger. The figure includes at least 1,000 drones with a range of more than 1,000 km, he said. Meanwhile, Kyiv has agreed with two US firms to jointly manufacture 155mm artillery shells in Ukraine, a Ukrainian minister [said](#) on 7 December, although production will not start for at least two years. "We have agreements with two leading American companies to jointly produce, in Ukraine, 155-calibre ammunition," Oleksandr Kamyshin said in televised comments.

Ukraine has agreed dozens of contracts for joint production or technology exchanges with western partners, Kyiv [said](#) on 15 December, as it strives to reduce its dependence on military supplies from the west and to boost domestic output. "We have dozens of new contracts between companies on joint production or technology exchange," Defence Minister Rustem Umerov said in a Facebook post. In September Ukraine hosted a [forum](#) with more than 250 western arms producers (see NATO Watch [Update 51](#)).

Military assistance to Russia

External military support to Russia so far has been limited to a handful of states, principally Belarus, [Iran](#) and [North Korea](#). The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, held talks in Moscow on 27 December with his Indian counterpart, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and [said](#) progress had been made on plans for Russia and India to jointly produce military equipment. Jaishankar added that he expected Vladimir Putin and the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to meet next year.

Russia [said](#) its newest howitzers will be deployed "soon" against Ukrainian forces. The head of the state-owned defence conglomerate Rostec, Sergei Chemezov, told

the RIA news agency on 27 December that testing of the new self-propelled artillery units, named Coalition-SV, had been completed and mass production had started, with the pilot batch to be delivered by the end of this year.

For further details on arms transfers to Ukraine, see, the [Forum on the Arms Trade](#). For a timeline of every US arms shipment to Ukraine that has been announced since the war began, see [here](#).

Humanitarian and environmental consequences of the war

Casualties

Exact figures for the number of war fatalities, both military and civilian, are difficult to verify and confirm, with [undercounting and manipulation](#) of the data is common in war. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project ([ACLED](#)), a disaggregated data collection, analysis and crisis mapping project, there were a total of 62,335 conflict-related fatalities in Ukraine between 24 February 2022 and 8 December 2023: 32,149 in battles; 28,820 in explosions/remote violence; 1,359 in violence against civilians; and 7 in protests/strategic developments. These may be low estimates of fatalities given that other public sources suggest much higher casualty rates. In the same period on Russian territory, ACLED has recorded 330 conflict-related fatalities: 134 in explosions/remote violence; 88 in battles; 60 in violence against civilians; and 48 in strategic developments.

Russian: A declassified US intelligence report [cited](#) by CNN on 13 December assessed that Russia has suffered 315,000 dead and injured troops, or 87% of the personnel it had when the conflict began. A UK Ministry of Defence [assessment](#) on 22 October gave a slightly lower estimate: 150,000-190,000 permanent casualties (killed or permanently wounded) since the Ukraine war began. If the numbers of temporary wounded (those recovered and due to return to the battlefield) are added, that number rises to 240,000-290,000, the UK MoD said. Russia has not released official figures for those killed in action since September 2022,

when it said 5,937 soldiers had died. Ukraine [claims](#) to have killed more than 357,000 Russian soldiers in the war to date. According to the UK's Ministry of Defence's daily intelligence [update](#) on 30 December, Russia experienced a sharp rise in the number of killed and wounded troops in 2023, due to "degradation" of military quality. The MoD said the average daily number of Russian casualties (killed and wounded) had risen by almost 300 a day compared with 2022. "The increase in daily averages, as reported by the Ukrainian authorities, almost certainly reflects the degradation of Russia's forces and its transition to a lower quality, high quantity mass army since the 'partial mobilisation' of reservists in September 2022".

Ukrainian: According to a New York Times [report](#) in August, Ukraine was said to have close to 70,000 killed and 100,000-120,000 wounded. The official Ukrainian armed forces' casualty toll is a secret, but speaking on Ukrainian tv on 2 December 2022, Kyiv's presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak [said](#) up to 13,000 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed since Russia invaded in February, apparently based on official figures from Ukraine's general staff. However, at certain points in the war, Ukraine [said](#) that between 100 and 200 of its forces were dying each day on the battlefield, making Podolyak's estimate seem conservative.

Civilian: More than 10,000 civilians have been killed in Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, with about half of recent deaths occurring far behind the frontlines, the UN human rights office [said](#). Its mission in Ukraine, which has dozens of monitors, said it expected the real toll to be "significantly higher" since the receipt of information from some locations where intense hostilities have been going on has been delayed and many reports are still pending corroboration. According to [Action on Armed Violence](#) (AOAV) the number of civilian casualties from explosive violence in the Ukrainian conflict reached 18,216 people by 20 December. From this number, 5,337 were killed and 12,879 were injured. Ninety-five per

cent (17,299) of civilian casualties have occurred in populated areas.

An [investigation](#) by the Associated Press found that Russian occupation authorities vastly and deliberately undercounted the dead after the flooding that followed the catastrophic explosion that [destroyed](#) the Kakhovka Dam in the southern Kherson region in June. Russia said 59 people drowned in the territory it controls. But AP determined the number is at least 200 to 300 in one town alone.

Antimicrobial-resistant (AMR) bacterial infections are spreading in Ukraine according to a new [report](#). AMR occurs when bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites stop responding to the drugs, causing the infections to become difficult, or even impossible, to treat. Meanwhile, with thousands of Ukrainians suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Ukraine's parliament voted on 19 December to legalise medical marijuana that many believe could help ease the problem, it was [reported](#). The new law, which will come into effect in six months, and which also allows cannabis to be used for scientific and industrial ends, passed by 248 votes in the 401-seat parliament in Kyiv.

Landmines

On 19 December, Russia's Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu [said](#) that since the start of what Moscow calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine, Russian forces had laid 7,000sq km of minefields along the 2,000km front line. Ukraine has become the most heavily mined country on Earth after a year and a half of Russian troops laying them down. Soldiers have been unearthing five mines for every square metre in some places, Oleksii Reznikov, then Ukraine's Defence Minister, [told the Guardian](#) on 13 August. According to the Washington Post, roughly 30 per cent of the country is now [contaminated](#) with unexploded ordnance, a problem that will require decades of effort to solve. More than 260 civilians have been killed in Ukraine and at least 571 injured during more than 560 incidents involving mines or explosive objects during the 20-month-old war, Ukraine's military [said](#) on 1 November. The World Bank estimates that Ukraine will need \$37.4 billion over the next

decade to support its demining work, adding yet another cost for reconstructing the country after the war ends.

Refugees

The number of [refugees](#) from the conflict stood at 6,338,600 as of 28 December, down from 8,207,977 on 9 May.

Carbon dioxide emissions

Russia's invasion of Ukraine accounts for about 150 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions—more than the annual emissions of Belgium—a Ukrainian deputy minister [cited](#) experts as saying on 4 December. "The war has a devastating impact on the environment. Air, soil and water is polluted as a result of the fighting," Viktoria Kireyeva, Ukraine's deputy minister of environmental protection and natural resources, said at a conference on the sidelines of the Cop28 climate conference in Dubai.

Further reading:

On outcomes and consequences of the war

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Connor Echols, [Diplomacy Watch: Ukraine peace talks could be on the horizon](#), Responsible Statecraft, 29 December 2023

[NATO Needs Russia 'Ruined' in Ukraine for Future Peace: Official](#), Newsweek, 29 December 2023

[Ukraine boosts domestic arms production at secret factories](#), El Pais, 29 December 2023

[UK Bolsters Ukraine Air Defence with More ASRAAM](#), Joint Forces.com, 29 December 2023

Blaise Malley, [Diplomacy Watch: Zelensky says discussion of negotiations 'not relevant'](#), Responsible Statecraft, 22 December 2023

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[Analysts Say Ukraine's Forces Are Pivoting to Defense After Russia Held off Their Counteroffensive](#), Military.com, 20 December 2023

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[Putin says Russia has no plan to attack NATO, dismisses Biden remark as 'nonsense'](#), Reuters, 17 December 2023

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Lawrence S. Wittner, [Replacing a disastrous war with a just peace in Ukraine](#), FPIF, 14 December 2023

[Russia has lost 87% of troops it had prior to start of Ukraine war, according to US intelligence assessment](#), CNN, 13 December 2023

Anatol Lieven, [Biden says Ukraine has already won. He's right](#), Responsible Statecraft, 13 December 2023

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[The west wavers on Ukraine](#), Financial Times, 8 December 2023

[Russian hackers targeted NATO forces and diplomats to aid Ukraine war effort](#), CNN, 7 December 2023

Iuliia Osmolovska, Volodymyr Havrylov and Hennadiy Maksak, [Five Security Scenarios on Russian War in Ukraine for 2024-2025: Implications and Policy Recommendations to Western Partners](#), Globsec, 7 December 2023

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, [GOP Debate: Ukraine inching toward the memory hole](#), Responsible Statecraft, 7 December 2023

Phil Miller, [Polish minister ‘saw UK special forces operating in Ukraine’](#), Declassified UK, 7 December 2023

Blaise Malley, [Biden warns of NATO war with Russia if aid disappears](#), Responsible Statecraft, 6 December 2023

[Biden: Help Ukraine Now or Send Americans to Fight Russia With NATO Later](#), US News, 6 December 2023

Tim Collins, [Ukraine’s special forces are waging a Churchill-style campaign to set Russia ablaze](#), Telegraph, 4 December 2023

[NATO should be ready for ‘bad news’ from Ukraine, Stoltenberg warns](#), Politico, 3 December 2023

Connor Echols, [Diplomacy Watch: New revelations shed light on early talks](#), Responsible Statecraft, 1 December 2023

Anatol Lieven, [What Would a Trump Administration Mean for the War in Ukraine?](#) Russia Matters, 30 November 2023

[Russia has stockpiled missiles for winter attack on Ukraine, says Nato](#), Financial Times, 30 November 2023

[Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lashes out at NATO and the West](#), EuroNews, 30 November 2023

Anatol Lieven, [Biden's role in Ukraine peace is clear now](#), Responsible Statecraft, 29 November 2023

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Stefan A. Schirm, [Alternative World Orders? Russia’s Ukraine War and the Domestic Politics of the BRICS](#), The International Spectator, vol.58 no3, 2023, pp.55-73

Anne Peters, [The war in Ukraine and legal limitations on Russian vetoes](#), Journal on the Use of Force and International Law, vol.10 no.2, 2023, pp.162-172

Amos C. Fox, [Comparative proxy strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian War](#), Comparative Strategy, vol. 42, No. 5, 2023, pp. 605–620

On the risk of nuclear war

Risks of a direct military confrontation between Russia and the United States/NATO are steadily growing. There have been [concerns](#) since the start of the war that it might escalate to the use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev [said](#) on 30 July that Moscow would be “forced” to use a nuclear weapon if Kyiv’s counteroffensive was a success and its forces “tore off a part of our land”. Medvedev, the deputy chair of Russia’s security council, said that in that situation “there would simply be no other option”. Medvedev’s apocalyptic rhetoric (also see his February [remarks](#)) has been seen as an attempt to deter Kyiv’s western allies from getting even more involved in the war. The Russian security council secretary, Nikolai Patrushev, [said](#) on 8 November that the “destructive” policies of the US and its allies were increasing the risk that nuclear, chemical or biological weapons would be used, Reuters reported.

The President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, [said](#) on 25 December that Russia had completed its shipments of nuclear weapons to his country, a move that has raised strong concerns in neighbouring Poland and elsewhere in the region. In March Russia [said](#) that it would station tactical nuclear weapons in neighbouring Belarus (see NATO Watch [Update 47](#)) and President Putin [confirmed](#) deployment of the first tranche on 16 June (see NATO Watch [Update 48](#)). Poland has [requested](#) that nuclear weapons be deployed on its territory, in what would be the first expansion of NATO nuclear sharing in more than six decades.

Anzhelika Solovyeva, [Moscow’s Perspective on Nuclear Deterrence and War](#), The RUSI Journal, vol.168 no.5, 2023, pp.20-33

On investigation of war crimes in Ukraine

UN human rights chief Volker Turk [said](#) on 19 December that there had been an “extensive failure” by Russia to take adequate measures to protect civilians in Ukraine and that there

were indications that Russian forces had committed war crimes. Turk said his office’s monitoring indicated “gross violations of international human rights law, serious violations of international humanitarian law, and war crimes, primarily by the forces of the Russian Federation”. International fact-finding missions and investigations have identified clear patterns of violation of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine since the Russian invasion in February 2022. The violations are wide-ranging, including the conduct of fighting as well as treatment of prisoners of war, forced abductions, torture, restriction of civil and human rights, and denial of essential services. The United Nations, the International Court of Justice (also known as the World Court), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights, the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Ukrainian national courts have all been active in attempting to hold criminals accountable – see box.

War crimes charges against four Russia-affiliated military personnel were unsealed on 6 December in the Eastern District of Virginia in the United States. The charges include torture, inhuman treatment, and unlawful confinement of a US national in Ukraine following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Meanwhile, Ukraine has launched an inquiry into what it [said](#) was an “execution” by Russian forces of two unarmed Ukrainian soldiers who were surrendering. Video showed the Ukrainian soldiers’ last moments as they emerged from their trench near the town of Avdiivka. One raised his arms in the air before they were both shot at close range.

Belarus’ President Alexander Lukashenko on 28 December [attended](#) a meeting with children brought from Russia-controlled areas of Ukraine, openly defying international [outrage](#) over his country’s involvement in Moscow’s deportation of Ukrainian children. Speaking at the event marking the arrival of a new group of Ukrainian children ahead of the New Year holiday, Lukashenko vowed to “embrace these

Selected war crimes investigations Feb 2022-October 2023

The **International Criminal Court (ICC)** opened an [investigation](#) into possible war crimes in Ukraine just days after Moscow's forces invaded and it dispatched dozens of investigators to the country to gather evidence. A substantial ICC investigative team [appears](#) to be working in Ukraine on a near permanent basis, and on 17 March 2023 the ICC [issued](#) an arrest warrant for President Putin for overseeing the [mass abduction](#) of Ukrainian children. Similarly, within the **OSCE** the **Moscow Mechanism** was activated to establish two expert missions to investigate violations and abuses committed in the war (see the subsequent [April](#) and [June](#) reports). On 14 July 2022, 45 countries [agreed](#) at a conference in the Hague to **coordinate investigations** into suspected war crimes in Ukraine.

The UN-backed **Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine** has published several reports (see, e.g., reports published on [October 2023](#); [March 2023](#); and [October 2022](#)) detailing evidence of a wide range of war crimes in Ukraine, including wilful killings, systematic torture and the deportation of children, with Russian armed forces responsible for the vast majority of the violations identified.

A [report](#) published on 7 December 2022 by the **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)** said Russian forces killed at least 441 civilians in the early days of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. The report documents attacks in dozens of towns and summary executions that it said might be war crimes. A second OHCHR [report](#) published on 27 June 2023 said Russian forces have carried out widespread and systematic torture of civilians detained in connection with its attack on Ukraine, summarily executing more than 70 of them. The **UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**— a body of [independent experts](#) that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination— [said](#) on 28 April 2023 that it is deeply concerned about human rights violations by Russian forces and private military companies in Ukraine, including enforced disappearances, torture, rape and extrajudicial executions.

On 31 October it was [reported](#) that two Russian soldiers have been arrested on suspicion of killing a family of nine, including two young children, in their home in the Russian-occupied eastern Ukrainian town of Volnovakha. It is the first known case of **Russia arresting its own soldiers** on suspicion of killing Ukrainian civilians.

European leaders convening in Iceland on 15-16 May 2023 for a **Council of Europe** Summit (only the fourth summit of the 46-member Council of Europe since it was founded after World War II) [pledged](#) to hold Russia to account for its war against Ukraine and unveiled a new mechanism - a Register of Damages - to track the losses and damage inflicted by Moscow's forces. The **UN Secretary-General's Annual Report** on Children and Armed Conflict in June 2023 [called out](#) Russia for killing 136 children in Ukraine in 2022 and also verified that Russian armed forces and affiliated groups injured 518 children and carried out 480 attacks on schools and hospitals.

Finally, a new [international office](#) to investigate Russia's invasion of Ukraine opened on 3 July in The Hague, in the first step towards a possible tribunal for Moscow's leadership. The **International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression (ICPA)**, which includes prosecutors from Ukraine, the EU, the United States and the ICC, will investigate and gather evidence in a move seen as an interim step before the creation of a special tribunal that could bring Russian officials to justice for starting the Ukraine war.

children, bring them to our home, keep them warm and make their childhood happier". Meanwhile, six children will be returned to Ukraine from Russia under a deal brokered by Qatar, [according](#) to a Qatari official. The children are en route to Ukraine via Moscow, the source said on 5 December. This is the second phase of a Qatar-mediated return of children, after four minors were returned in October.

Scott R. Anderson and Natalie K. Orpett, [A Historic War Crimes Prosecution—With More to Come](#), Lawfare, 6 December 2023

[Four Russia-Affiliated Military Personnel Charged with War Crimes in Connection with Russia's Invasion of Ukraine](#), US Department of Justice, News Release, 6 December 2023

On the Black Sea grain agreement and global food security

President Zelensky said that Ukraine's alternative Black Sea export corridor – introduced after Russia [withdrew](#) from a UN and Türkiye -brokered deal to guarantee safe shipment of Ukrainian grain in July (see NATO Watch [Update 49](#)) – had sent out 12 million tonnes of cargo so far. He added in his nightly [video address](#) on 28 December that the corridor had produced “particularly significant results for December, and this is felt at the level of our entire economy”. Meanwhile, Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria plan to sign a deal in January on a joint plan to clear mines floating in the Black Sea as a result of the war in Ukraine, Turkish Defence Minister Yasar Guler [said](#) on 16 December, after months of talks between the NATO allies. Speaking to reporters at a meeting in Ankara, Guler said the “Trilateral Initiative” would only include Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria for now, and their defence ministers planned to hold a signing ceremony in Istanbul on 11 January 2024.

Russia has been [attacking](#) Ukrainian port infrastructure on the Danube and targeting Kyiv's use of alternative river, rail and road routes. This disintegration of one of the few diplomatic breakthroughs in the war has dragged the conflict into the maritime theatre and risks expanding the war in other ways. Despite some discussions to reactivate the Black Sea grain agreement, there is no immediate prospect of this happening.

Hussam Hussein and Matyas Knol, [The Ukraine War, Food Trade and the Network of Global Crises](#), The International Spectator, vol.58 no.3, 2023, pp.74-95

On sanctions against Russia and post-war reconstruction in Ukraine

Sanctions – an overview

Since February 2022, [Western sanctions](#) against Russia following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine have included actions against its financial system, its oil and gas sector and

individuals linked to President Vladimir Putin. The rationale for these sanctions is simple: to punish Vladimir Putin's government and pressure him to pull his forces back. While Ukraine's allies, led by the G7, have managed to convince some countries to follow suit, others – predominantly from the [Global South](#) – have displayed little enthusiasm for adhering to unilateral sanctions against Russia. While the sanctions lists are sometimes difficult to interpret, the EU has [sanctioned](#) almost 1,800 individuals and entities—an approximate doubling of its entire sanctions portfolio across the dozens of sanctions regimes it implements; the UK Government has [frozen](#) more than £18bn of assets belonging to oligarchs and other Russians and UK [sanctions](#) have been imposed on over 1,500 individuals and entities; and the US has [sanctioned](#) more than 1,000 individuals or organizations since the invasion. The numbers, and the pace of the rollout, dwarf the sanctions lists for the likes of Iran, North Korea, Libya, the thematic counterterrorism lists, and all others. There have also been calls to confiscate already-frozen Russian state assets, but so far only [Canada](#) and the [Czech Republic](#) have enacted the authority to do so.

New announcements

Taiwan's economy ministry [said](#) on 26 December it expanded a list of sanctioned goods for Russia and Belarus. The list includes equipment for making semiconductors, where Taiwan is a world leader, as well as certain chemicals and medicines. Financial institutions that support the Russian military-industrial complex are to be blacklisted in the **United States** after President Biden [signed](#) an executive order on 23 December to deny banks under sanctions access to the American financial system. **German** federal prosecutors [said](#) on 20 December they aim to seize hundreds of millions of euros from an unnamed Russian bank. “The aim of these proceedings is to seize more than 720 million euros deposited by a Russian financial institution in a bank account in Frankfurt am Main due to a suspected attempt to violate embargo regulations” under German law, the prosecutors office said in a statement.

The EU adopted a [new package of sanctions](#) on Russia on 18 December that included an import ban on Russian diamonds, officials said. (G7 leaders [agreed](#) on 6 December to restrict imports of Russian diamonds from next year in a tightening of sanctions over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine). The package is the 12th EU packet levelled at Moscow since it launched its invasion of Ukraine. President Zelensky [said](#) the new sanctions would "truly reduce" Russia's economic foundation for war. The sanctions are designed to reduce Russia's access to revenues, metals and technology used to sustain its war effort. In addition, Japan [announced](#) on 15 December expanded sanctions over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, revealing dozens of newly sanctioned firms and other organisations, including export bans against some outside Russia and its ally Belarus. Tokyo added to its sanctions list 57 organisations in Russia and six others in countries including the United Arab Emirates, Armenia, Syria and Uzbekistan, the trade ministry said in a statement.

Olympic chiefs were [criticised](#) by the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry on 9 December for allowing Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete next year as neutrals, outside team events and if they do not actively support the invasion. Athletes from Russia and Belarus have faced sanctions from a multitude of sports since Moscow launched its assault on Ukraine in February 2022, but several sports have eased restrictions over the past year.

Impact on Russia

Russia's tax revenue from exports of oil and petroleum products has fallen by 32% after a price ceiling was [enacted](#) by the US and its allies 12 months ago to restrict funding for its war in Ukraine, US authorities [said](#) 20 December. In a statement published by the Treasury Department, the allies also announced that rules surrounding the price cap will be tightened. Meanwhile, Russia may sever diplomatic ties with the United States if Washington confiscates Russian assets frozen over the Ukrainian conflict, Russia's Interfax news agency [quoted](#) the Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov as saying on 22

December. The Kremlin said Russia would never leave in peace any country that seized its assets, adding that it would look at what western assets it could seize in retaliation if that occurred. The comments came amid suggestions from some western politicians that frozen Russian assets worth \$300 billion be handed to Ukraine.

Jan Stockbruegger, [Reducing Russia's Oil Revenues](#), The RUSI Journal, vol.168 no.5, 2023, pp.34-42

On energy security in Europe (and the Nord Stream attack)

Europe and Western partners are striving to diversify their energy supply sources to curb dependence on Russia. Gas shortages occurred across Europe during 2022 but now appear to have eased. Meanwhile, Japan's Mitsui & Co has decided to pull its employees out of Russia's Arctic LNG 2 liquefied natural gas (LNG) project, it was [reported](#) on 26 December. Fearing the backlash from US sanctions targeting the project, foreign shareholders have suspended their participation.

Questions continue as to who blew up the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. According to a [joint investigation](#) by the Washington Post and Der Spiegel published on 11 November, a senior Ukrainian military official played a key role in the sabotage. Many European governments have suspected Russia, while Vladimir Putin has blamed the US and its allies. Ukraine has strenuously denied any link to the attacks. Investigations by Denmark, Germany and Sweden into explosions on the Nord Stream gas pipelines have not yet concluded. For an overview of the various allegations and media reports on the issue, see NATO Watch [Update 47](#). An investigation conducted by Intelligence Online as part of a European media consortium [concluded](#) that the attack has its roots in Ukraine (mirroring the [conclusions](#) of Der Spiegel in August).

Svitlana Romanko and Oleh Savitskyi, [The US and NATO must clamp down on Russian fossil fuels to end the war in Ukraine](#), Atlantic Council, 13 December 2023

Joshua Krasna, [The Israel-Hamas War Could Sink Gas Development in the Eastern Med](#), World Politics Review, 11 December 2023 (paywall)

[Germany accidentally disclosed sensitive NATO information to Russia](#), TVP World, 2 December 2023

On China's position on the war

Exports of goods from Russia to China will reach a record of more than \$110 billion in 2023, Russian first deputy prime minister Andrei Belousov [said](#) on 21 December. Moscow has deepened its already close ties with China to try to offset western sanctions. Although China's position on Russia-China relations and on the Russia-West confrontation is not uniform, the Chinese Government has presented a relatively consistent and developed position. First, that the war undermines the stability of the international system and that a zero-sum game must be avoided, and second, that any use of nuclear weapons is a 'red line' that should not be crossed. China is also being touted both as a potential mediator in the conflict and as a future supplier of lethal aid to Russia (see NATO Watch [update 44](#)).

Despite widespread Western criticism of China's position on the war in Ukraine, and the claim in NATO's new [Strategic Concept](#) of a "deepening strategic partnership" between China and Russia, there is no evidence that China has been giving lethal support for Russia's war in Ukraine. However, according to an unclassified US intelligence [report](#) released on 27 July, China is helping Russia evade western sanctions and likely providing Moscow with military technology for use in Ukraine. "The PRC is providing some dual-use technology that Moscow's military uses to continue the war in Ukraine, despite an international cordon of sanctions and export controls," the report said.

Kurtis H. Simpson, [Sino-Russian Relations: The Implications of Putin's Strategic Folly](#), CIGI Papers No. 288, December 2023

On developments within Russia

Security developments

The assassination of the Wagner mercenary army chief Yevgeny Prigozhin was approved by a close ally of Vladimir Putin, the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) on 22 December after conversations with western intelligence officials and a former Russian intelligence officer. The Kremlin [accused](#) the Wall Street Journal of publishing "pulp fiction". Meanwhile, a Russian general died while deployed in Ukraine, the governor of Russia's Voronezh region [said](#) on 4 December, the latest high-ranking Russian military figure to die during the 21-month offensive. "Maj Gen Vladimir Zavadsky, deputy commander of the 14th Army Corps of the Northern Fleet, died in the line of duty in a special operation zone," Voronezh governor Alexander Gusev said on Telegram, using the Russian term for its offensive in Ukraine.

President Putin signed a decree to increase the maximum number of servicemen in the Russian armed forces by 170,000, the Kremlin and the defence ministry [said](#) on 1 December. The regular strength of the armed forces is now set at 1,320,000 servicemen, according to the document.

Political and economic developments

Vladimir Putin will run for president again as an independent candidate with a wide support base but not on a party ticket, Russian news agencies [reported](#) on 16 December, citing his supporters. An initiative group made up of over 700 politicians and figures from the sporting and cultural worlds met on Saturday in Moscow and unanimously endorsed Putin's nomination as an independent candidate, Russian news agencies said. President Putin had already [said](#) on 8 December that he would run for re-election in the 17 March 2024 presidential poll, moving the longtime Russian leader a step closer to a fifth term in office. Putin's long-term spokesperson said in a previous interview: "[Putin will be re-elected](#) next year with more than 90% of the vote". The Russian Constitution was amended in 2020,

effectively allowing Putin to remain Russia's leader until 2036.

The chair of Russia's upper house Valentina Matviyenko said residents in four occupied Ukrainian regions would be able to vote for the first time. Ukraine [condemned](#) Russian plans to hold presidential elections on occupied territory, declaring them "null and void" and pledging to prosecute any observers sent to monitor them. Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said: "We call on the international community to resolutely condemn Russia's intention to hold presidential elections in the occupied Ukrainian territories, and to impose sanctions on those involved in their organisation and conduct".

The Communist party of Russia, the second largest party in parliament, on 23 December [selected](#) a 75-year-old candidate, Nikolai Kharitonov, who won just under 14% of the national vote when he stood against Putin in 2004, to stand in the presidential polls. Hundreds of supporters of Igor Girkin, a jailed former commander of Russian-backed fighters in Ukraine, [rallied](#) in Moscow on 24 December to back his bid to stand for president. Better known by his alias Igor Strelkov, Girkin was a key leader of separatist fighters in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The nationalist has strongly criticised Russia's military strategy in Ukraine for being "too kind". He was [detained in July](#) on an extremism charge after a series of posts critical of President Putin.

However, a Russian politician calling for peace in Ukraine has been denied the chance to run for president. Russia's central election commission refused to accept the former regional legislator Yekaterina Duntsova's initial nomination by a group of supporters, citing errors in the paperwork, including spelling. After losing an appeal on 27 December against the commission's decision, Duntsova [said](#) she would start working on the creation of her own political party that would stand for "peace, freedom and democracy".

Russia's central bank on 15 December [raised](#) its key interest rate to 16 percent, announcing a fifth rise since summer in a bid to fight

accelerating inflation. The central bank has been grappling with the economic fallout of the offensive in Ukraine that includes western sanctions, a surge in government military spending and the call-up of hundreds of thousands of men.

Domestic repression

Repression of dissent within Russia has continued, with severe punishments being meted out to ordinary Russians for even small acts of civil protest against the invasion of Ukraine. A Moscow court sentenced two men on 28 December to several years in prison for taking part in the recital of verses against the Ukraine campaign during an anti-mobilisation protest last year. Artyom Kamardin, 33, received a seven-year sentence for reciting a poem, and Yegor Shtovba, 23, was sentenced to five and a half years for attending the protest. Meanwhile, Russia issued an arrest warrant for Maria Pevchikh, a longtime ally of jailed opposition figure Alexei Navalny, it was [reported](#) on 21 December. Navalny was located at a penal colony in the Arctic Yamal-Nenets region of northern Russia, his spokesperson Kira Yarmysh [confirmed](#) on 25 December, after his lawyers were unable to contact him for over a week. On 11 December, Navalny's supporters [said](#) he failed to appear by videoconference for a court hearing, with prison officials blaming a power outage. Later that day, Navalny's lawyers were told he was no longer listed as a prisoner at IK-6, the penal colony where he has been incarcerated in the Vladimir region near Moscow.

It was [announced](#) on 18 December that renowned detective novelist Grigory Chkhartishvili – known under the pen name Boris Akunin – had been placed on Russia's list of individuals identified as terrorists or extremists for his criticism of Moscow's war in Ukraine. Chkhartishvili [said](#) he feared the move signalled a new milestone in the country's history under the Russian president. The writer, who lives in exile, told Agence France-Presse: "Putin's regime has clearly decided to take a very important new step on its way from a police, autocratic state to a totalitarian state".

The Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, arrested in Russia on espionage charges, [lost an appeal](#) on 14 December to be released from jail and must remain in custody until at least 30 January 2024. Putin was asked during his press conference about a possible prisoner swap for Gershkovich and former US marine Paul Whelan. He said he hoped to find an agreement with the US that was “satisfactory to both sides”. Meanwhile, a court on 1 December [extended](#) the detention of Russian-American journalist Alsu Kurmasheva until 5 February. Kurmasheva is a Prague-based journalist for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) was detained on 2 June 2023.

President Putin [said](#) on 4 December that Russia should never repeat Soviet-era mass repressions, even as Moscow [carries out an unprecedented crackdown](#) on opponents of its Ukraine campaign. “It is important for us that nothing like this repeats itself in the history of our country”, Putin told his human rights council, according to Russian news agencies, referring to the mass repression seen under the Soviet Union. However, Russian authorities are attempting to quell dissent from the wives of soldiers deployed in Ukraine, the UK Ministry of Defence [said](#) on 2 December in its daily intelligence briefing. Some were reportedly being paid off while others have been discredited online.

[Russia increases maximum size of armed forces by 170,000 servicemen](#), Reuters, 1 December 2023

Martin Verrier, [Overestimating Soviet Airpower](#), *The RUSI Journal*, vol, 168 no.5, 2023, pp.44-52

On Ukraine’s NATO and EU membership applications and other developments

NATO developments

NATO leaders [agreed](#) at their Vilnius summit (see NATO Watch Update 49) that “Ukraine’s future” is in the alliance and the country will join when “allies agree and conditions are met”, but failed to provide a timeline for when that will happen. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg underlined the Alliance’s

unwavering support to Ukraine during a meeting with Ukrainian Defence Minister Rustem Umerov in Brussels on 4 December 2023. Poland will demand the full mobilisation of the free world to help Ukraine, the newly appointed prime minister, Donald Tusk, [said](#) on 12 December. He said: “We will demand full mobilisation of the west to help Ukraine. I can no longer listen to politicians who talk about being tired of the situation in Ukraine”.

EU developments

The [EU summit](#) on 14-15 December brought good and bad news for Ukraine. The EU [decided](#) on 14 December to open membership negotiations with Ukraine after eight hours of tense negotiations in Brussels, and despite the opposition of Hungary, whose prime minister, Viktor Orbán, had for weeks said it would veto any opening of accession talks. After hours of talks, Orbán walked out the room as leaders formally made the decision to open accession talks – thus getting unanimity. The Hungarian Prime Minister said “Hungary does not want to share in this bad decision, and for this reason Hungary did not participate in the decision today”. President Zelensky [said](#): “this is a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe. A victory that motivates, inspires, and strengthens”. The EU also decided to open membership negotiations with Moldova and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as bestowing candidate status on Georgia.

Orbán [said](#) on 15 December his country would have plenty of future opportunities to interrupt Ukraine’s process of joining the EU. In an interview with Hungarian state radio, Orbán said that EU leaders told him he would “lose nothing” by dropping his veto since he’d have chances in the future to block Ukraine’s accession if he chose to. “Their decisive argument was that Hungary loses nothing, given that the final word on Ukraine’s membership has to be given by the national parliaments, 27 parliaments, including the Hungarian one,” Orbán said.

Later, EU leaders [failed](#) to agree on a €50 billion aid package for Ukraine and on the renegotiation of the EU budget after a veto by Hungary. The financial package could not be

endorsed by all 27 leaders. Ukraine [expressed confidence it would receive the €50bn aid package](#) from the EU despite the [Hungarian veto](#). In a [statement](#), the Foreign Ministry in Kyiv said it expected “all necessary legal procedures” to be completed at the [next EU summit](#) on 1 February 2024, with the aid delivered “as soon as possible”. French President Emmanuel Macron [said](#) Orbán must not be allowed to take the EU “hostage”. As leaders of the EU start working on the details of plan B to raise the money through cash and loans, the French President said Orbán was being dishonest to the public about his reasons for vetoing the financial package and would ultimately come around. Russia [congratulated](#) Hungary for blocking the aid to Ukraine. “Hungary, in contrast to many European countries, firmly defends its interests, which impresses us,” Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said in Moscow.

The European Commission will release a further 1.5 billion euros for Ukraine under existing arrangements, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [said](#) at a news conference at the end of the summit. The five Nordic nations [told](#) Zelensky during talks in Oslo on 13 December that they would support his country “for as long as it takes” in its struggle to drive out Russian forces. Together, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland have provided aid to Ukraine worth 11 billion euros since Russia invaded in February 2022 and are ready to continue giving extensive military, economic and humanitarian support, the five nations said in a joint statement.

The Ukrainian parliament on 8 December [approved](#) four bills necessary to start EU accession talks, including one on national minorities’ rights, a critical demand from Hungary.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán during his annual press conference on 21 December [insisted](#) on calling Russia’s invasion of Ukraine a “military operation”, mirroring language used by the Kremlin. “It is a military operation ... as long as there is no declaration of war between the two countries. When the Russians

declare war on Ukraine, then it will be war”, he said. Orbán also said he had accepted an invitation from President Zelensky to hold a bilateral meeting in the future, a potential first between the two leaders since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Europeans are generally open to the idea of Ukraine joining the EU, despite the costs and risks, but lukewarm at best about the bloc’s prospective enlargement to also take in Georgia and countries in the western Balkans, [according to a survey](#). The polling, of six EU member states for the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), found considerable support for the candidacies of Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, Moldova and Montenegro, but also deep economic and security concerns. The polling found support for Ukraine’s entry highest in Denmark (50%) and Poland (47%), with opinion roughly divided in Romania (32% for, 29% against), Germany (37% for, 39% against), and France (29% for, 35% against). Austria was 52% opposed.

Political and economic developments in Ukraine

Ukrainian border guards prevented the ex-president Petro Poroshenko from leaving the country on 1 December because he planned to meet the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, Kyiv’s security services [said](#). Ukraine’s SBU security services said the former leader – who was in power from 2014 to 2019 – was turned back due to his planned meeting with Orbán.

Ukrainian officials have discussed the possibility of reopening Boryspil International Airport, which was closed for war reasons, President Zelensky [said](#) on 19 December after a Boeing 777-300 operated by local airline Skyline Express took off from the airport with no passengers or cargo on board. The so-called “technical flight” was a sign the infrastructure remains in working condition and safety can be granted despite constant Russian air attacks. In addition, Ukraine’s sports ministry is developing a system that will allow fans to attend stadiums and watch games which have been off limits to the public since Russia

launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022, it was [reported](#) on 2 December.

Trade dispute with Poland

Poland is getting closer to ending the truck driver blockades of several border crossings with Ukraine, the country's prime minister, Donald Tusk [said](#) on 27 December. Polish drivers have been blocking several crossings with Ukraine since 6 November, demanding the EU reinstate a system whereby Ukrainian companies need permits and the same for European truckers to enter Ukraine. Ukrainian truckers have been exempt from seeking border crossing permits since Russia's invasion, and Polish drivers say that this has undercut business and they want restrictions. The blockade of one of the border crossings between Ukraine and Poland was ended and the movement of lorries fully restored, the Ukrainian border service [said](#) on 24 December. Ukraine had begun [using train platforms](#) on 7 December to bypass the [border blockade](#). The first train deployed in the operation moved 23 trucks across the border from Ukraine into Poland, a statement said. Poland on 4 December had [called](#) on the EU to restore permits limiting transit for Ukrainian truckers.

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