

 BRIEF

Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Situational Updates

ZEROFOX INTELLIGENCE

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Scope Note

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Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Situational Updates

Executive Summary

A concerted Russian assault in Kyiv is anticipated but depends on their success encircling the city, which has been slowed in recent days. Mariupol continues to face a humanitarian crisis amid Russian bombardment. The first high-level negotiations between Ukrainian and Russian foreign ministers concluded with no ceasefire agreement. More than two million refugees have left Ukraine since fighting began, with more than half of those having fled to Poland.

Analyst Commentary

The Russian military continues its efforts to encircle Kyiv from the west, but its movement has been slowed amid fighting with Ukrainian forces and possible logistical issues. Western officials say that the large armored convoy to the capital's northwest has made little progress since it was first identified by satellites in late February. Russian forces have also moved to the outskirts of Kyiv from the northeast, with some having bypassed Chernihiv on their approach to the capital. Despite the stilted pace of Russian operations around Kyiv, a heavy assault on the city with artillery bombardment and intense urban fighting appears inevitable, though the timeline for such an advance will likely depend on Russia's success surrounding Kyiv. Ukrainian defense officials claim they have held off Russian advances toward Kharkiv, though there is little evidence of concerted Russian efforts to take the city.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has stated that the besieged coastal city of Mariupol currently faces the worst military and humanitarian situation of any Ukrainian city. Mariupol's mayor reported that residents have been without water, heat, electricity, and sanitation for 10 days. On March 9, 2022, an artillery strike hit the maternity and children's wards of a hospital and killed three people, including one child. President Volodymyr Zelensky called the strike a war crime and rejected Russian



claims that the hospital was cleared of patients and was serving as a militia base for the Azov Battalion.¹

On March 10, 2022, Foreign Minister Kuleba and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met in the Turkish coastal city Antalya for the first high-level negotiations between the two sides. The talks, however, did not yield noteworthy progress on a cessation of fighting. In a press conference that followed the talks, Kuleba said that his proposal for a 24-hour ceasefire in the entire combat area was not agreed to, and he suggested that Lavrov did not come to the meeting with the authority to make any major agreements. Lavrov denied that a ceasefire had been discussed and stated that his conversation with Kuleba did not supersede the ongoing diplomatic negotiations between Russian and Ukrainian delegations in Belarus.

Western governments are still sending weapons deliveries into Ukraine, particularly anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, but the proposed deal to send Polish MiG-29 fighter jets to the Ukrainian military appears to have collapsed. On March 8, 2022, the U.S. Defense Department said that it had rejected a Polish proposal to assist the Ukrainian war effort by sending MiG-29 fighter jets to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany, after which they would have been flown to the battlefield by Ukrainian pilots. Defense Department Press Secretary John Kirby said that the prospect of sending the jets from the U.S. base would be too risky, suggesting that it would be considered too intimate an involvement by NATO in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Poland rejected a similar proposal that would have had them send the MiGs to Ukraine because they "are not a party to this war," according to a statement by the Polish prime minister.²

International Response

On March 9, 2022, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to approve a ban on imports of Russian oil, natural gas, and coal products. The bill will also include "revisiting" Russia's role in the World Trade Organization and reauthorization of the Magnitsky Act, through which sanctions against Russia for alleged human rights violations are approved. According to the White House, the United States imported almost 700,000 barrels of Russian oil and refined petroleum products per day in 2021.³ The United Kingdom (UK) also announced sanctions on Russian oil, with the government stating it would phase out imports by the end of 2022. Russian oil accounts for eight percent of total UK oil demand.⁴

¹ <https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa>

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<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-poland-nato-5724ff192113703d829024dc4410664e>

³

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/08/fact-sheet-united-states-bans-imports-of-russian-oil-liquefied-natural-gas-and-coal/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-phase-out-russian-oil-imports>



While the European Union (EU) rejected calls for a total ban on Russian gas imports, it introduced the REPowerEU plan on March 9, 2022, which proposes to make the EU independent from Russian energy by 2030 and reduce the demand for Russian gas by two-thirds by the end of 2022. The plan calls for a higher minimum level of gas storage and an immediate diversification of gas imports. Negotiations with Algeria, Norway, and Azerbaijan are reportedly ongoing for urgent deliveries, while long-term prospects for liquified natural gas purchases will focus on the United States, Australia, Qatar, and other exporters.⁵

The UK sanctioned seven new Russian billionaires on March 10, 2022, including Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin and Chelsea Football Club owner Roman Abramovich. The sanctioned billionaires' UK assets will be frozen, and they will be banned from entering the UK or conducting transactions with UK citizens or businesses. Swiss-based Bank for International Settlements, which links central banks, said on March 10, that it was suspending the Bank of Russia and applying international sanctions.

A rapidly-growing number of Western corporations are ending their Russian operations or discontinuing new investments. Goldman Sachs became the first major Wall Street bank to do so with its March 10, 2022, announcement that it was “winding down its business in Russia,” and the company has already moved some of its Russia-based staff to Dubai.⁶ Carlsberg Group announced that it would cease new investments or exports into Russia, end advertising by Carlsberg Group and Baltika Breweries, and stop selling Carlsberg in Russia.⁷ Western Union likewise stated that it was suspending operations in Russia and Belarus.

Russia has responded to sanctions and the withdrawal of Western businesses with its own countermeasures. United Russia, the country's ruling party, said that it has taken the first steps towards legalizing the nationalization of assets owned by foreign businesses that leave Russia. President Vladimir Putin said that Russia would find legal means to introduce “external management” of foreign assets.⁸ The export of telecommunications, agricultural, and electrical equipment that was imported into Russia has been banned until at least the end of 2022 to prevent sanctions-related shortages. Russia will also ban certain classes of timber exports to 48 countries, including the United States and EU members that are considered unfriendly to Russia, as well as exports of railway carriages, cars, containers, and turbines.

Physical Security Impacts

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1511

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<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-10/goldman-sachs-to-exit-russia-in-wall-street-s-first-pullout>

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<https://www.carlsberggroup.com/newsroom/update-on-ukraine-and-russia-suspension-of-2022-guidance/>

⁸ https://t.me/er_molnia/3030



The Russian advance on Kyiv has slowed, but its capture remains Russia's foremost military objective. Russian forces are moving west around Kyiv to encircle the city but are facing strong Ukrainian resistance. A March 9, 2022, assault on Irpin, northwest of Kyiv, was deterred by Ukrainian forces. Russian units are also moving closer to the city from the northeast and east, pressing the Ukrainians into a tighter defensive structure within the city.

With extensive combat operations ongoing in the south and east, Russian forces have not yet brought overwhelming force to bear on Kyiv. Ukrainian forces have been able to harass Russian supply lines in the northeast and prevent the capture of Sumy, Chernihiv, and Nizhyn. However, the northeastern approach to Kyiv is largely cut off from assistance and is being bypassed. Therefore, a large assault on Kyiv appears inevitable, and it will likely include a high volume of missile and artillery strikes and the possibility of a large number of civilian casualties. Intense urban warfare within the city is also likely. Vitaly Klitschko, Mayor of Kyiv, said that nearly half of Kyiv's population has fled the fighting and that the remaining civilians and military forces have transformed the city "into a fortress."⁹

In the south, Russian military forces continue to surround and bombard Mariupol with devastating effects on the civilian population. The Russian Defense Ministry reported on March 10, 2022, that militia units from the Donetsk People's Republic took control of several neighborhoods in Mariupol.¹⁰ The expected assault on Odesa no longer appears imminent, as Russian advances toward and around Mykolaiv have slowed. An eventual attack on Odesa remains likely, though it is unclear whether Russian forces will focus firepower on Mykolaiv first or bypass the city.

Ukrainian Refugee Flow

The United Nations said that over two million Ukrainian refugees have left for other European countries, with over half having gone to Poland. Georgia, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, and Slovakia have also taken in a considerable number of Ukrainian refugees. These numbers will undoubtedly increase, as millions of Ukrainians remain internally displaced inside Ukraine and Russia's military tactics become more brutal as the conflict endures. Taking in refugees does leave recipient countries vulnerable to a Russian response, especially if vocal diaspora populations target Russia. Russian threat actors are more likely to target countries and industries from which criticism of Russia has come. Industries that have taken a position on the conflict could find themselves targeted by cyber actors, while assassination campaigns against high-profile Ukrainians abroad are possible.

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/10/half-of-kyiv-population-has-fled-says-ukrainian-capital-mayor>

¹⁰ <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/76153/>



Ukrainians have some specific legal advantages that other non-Ukrainian refugees do not. After Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, Ukrainians were granted visa-free travel to EU countries. After the military escalation in February 2022, the EU relaxed certain border controls, allowing Ukrainians to enter without a passport. The EU has also authorized the Temporary Protection Directive, which would grant Ukrainians residency permits for up to three years. This allows Ukrainians to achieve permanent status more easily than by declaring asylum, which involves a lengthy legal process. Whether these protections remain as the refugee numbers begin to strain European resources is unclear. This could see non-European countries, led by the United States and western Europe, begin to accept more refugees from Ukraine. The United States has temporarily suspended deportation flights to Georgia, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia so their resources are not stretched by taking in deportees and refugees. Western EU nations like Germany and Spain are also increasingly taking in refugees.

More than 2 million people have fled Ukraine since Feb. 24



Source: <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085200492/ukraine-2-million-refugees-russian-invasion>