

 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

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not declare war on Ukraine or announce a general mobilization during his May 9, 2022, Victory Day speech. However, U.S. intelligence officials still believe that he intends to again expand the war beyond the Donbas if the Russian military's ongoing offensive is successful. Russian state-owned gas corporation Gazprom announced sanctions against Yamal pipeline operators on May 11, 2022, that will stop gas from flowing to European customers through the pipeline. The Russia-installed military-civilian administration in the Kherson region announced their intent to join Russia, which suggests that a regional independence referendum is imminent.

Analyst Commentary

President Putin's highly anticipated Victory Day speech in Moscow on May 9, 2022 delivered a more muted message than was feared by some Western governments. It did not include a declaration of war against Ukraine or the announcement of a general mobilization—nor was the speech triumphant in its description of Russian military efforts. However, U.S. intelligence officials are not convinced that President Putin's relatively subdued tone means that his desire to conquer Ukraine has lessened. Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines told the Senate Armed Services Committee, during testimony on May 10, 2022 that President Putin has prepared for a “prolonged conflict in Ukraine during which he still intends to achieve goals beyond the Donbas.” Haines also said that the Donbas offensive, which began after Russian troops withdrew from northern Ukraine, was designed to help Russia “regain the initiative,” possibly in advance of an attack on Odesa and an attempt to create a land bridge to Transnistria.¹

¹ <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-worldwide-threats>



Notably, President Putin did not declare victory based on the Russian occupation of Mariupol or suggest that a successful occupation of the Donbas would conclude the “special military operation.” This may have been a rhetorical tactic designed to leave open the possibility that he could again expand the war’s objectives should the military operation in the Donbas prove successful; alternatively, it may have simply reflected the reality that the Russian military is not effectively prosecuting the war. Nevertheless, he vigorously defended the invasion, calling it a “pre-emptive” military action against an impending Ukrainian attack. The invasion was, according to the Russian president, necessary to thwart a NATO-backed Ukrainian assault on Crimea and the Donbas. President Putin also claimed that Ukraine was preparing to develop nuclear weapons and said that the Russian military was fighting on historic land that it defended during World War II.²

Ukrainian officials quickly rejected President Putin’s characterization of the war. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky released a competing May 9, 2022 address that called the conflict a “war of two worldviews” and promised that Ukraine would soon celebrate two Victory Days.³ He also praised the U.S. government for passing the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act, which will accelerate the provision of weapons to Ukraine. Presidential advisor Mykhailo Podolyak said that Ukraine never had plans to attack Crimea and that “the Russian military is dying, not defending their country, but trying to occupy another.”⁴

International Response

On May 11, 2022, Gazprom announced sanctions against European Union (EU) gas companies associated with the Yamal pipeline, stating that it had introduced a ban on transactions with and payments to the affected companies. Gazprom also said that the sanctions mean that gas will no longer flow through the Yamal pipeline. The sanctions will affect Europol Gaz, the Polish gas company that owns the portion of the pipeline that passes through Poland, as well as Germania, a collection of gas storage and trading companies that was formerly a unit of Gazprom. Also on May 11, 2022, the Ukrainian Gas Transmission System Operator requested that Gazprom cease the flow of gas through a pipeline that transits Ukraine, alleging that Russian occupying forces were siphoning gas from the pipeline and endangering its integrity.⁵

2

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/world/europe/putin-speech-victory-day-ukraine-war.html>

3

<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-ukrayini-z-nagodi-dnya-peremogi-nad-na-74925>

⁴ https://twitter.com/Podolyak_M/status/1523579499639881729

5

<https://www.reuters.com/business/russia-sanctions-gazprom-germania-units-owner-polist-part-yamal-europe-pipeline-2022-05-11/>



Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced the second phase of exercises to test the military's rapid response capabilities on May 10, 2022.⁶ The exercises are concentrated on Belarus' borders with NATO members Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, though the Ukrainian General Staff has reported that some battalions are positioned near the border with Ukraine. The Belarusian Defense Ministry announced plans for the first round of exercises on May 5, 2022 in response to alleged NATO sabotage and special operations threats along Belarus' borders. Despite its heightened state of readiness, the Belarusian military is unlikely to directly participate in the Russia-Ukraine conflict due to the risk of added domestic upheaval and instability that involvement in the war could bring.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Bucha—the suburb outside of Kyiv that has become the focus of Ukrainian allegations that Russia is committing war crimes—on May 10, 2022. She is the highest ranking German official to have visited Ukraine, and her visit likely signals intent to resolve the tension caused when the Ukrainian government refused to host German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in April, claiming that he is too friendly with Russia.

Physical Security Impacts

The Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine continues with no significant breakthroughs, but Russian forces are slowly approaching Severodonetsk from the north and west. Their goal appears to be the encirclement of the Severodonetsk and Lysychansk metro area. In recent days, Russian forces have attempted to cross the Siverskyi Donets river near the town of Bilohorivka, located just west of Severodonetsk. Satellite imagery from May 9, 2022 showed that at least two Russian pontoon bridges and numerous Russian military vehicles were destroyed by Ukrainian weapons that targeted the river crossing.⁷

President Zelensky said that at least 60 people died in Bilohorivka on May 7, 2022, when a Russian bomb was dropped on a school being used for shelter. At least one person died in Odesa on May 9, 2022 when seven Russian missiles struck the Black Sea port city. European Council President Charles Michel was in Odesa during the missile strikes, and a meeting between Michel and Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal was interrupted when they had to enter a bomb shelter.

The head of the Russia-formed military-civilian administration in Kherson oblast reportedly declared that they would appeal directly to President Putin to be annexed by Russia. In response, the Russian government said that the choice would be up to the local residents, suggesting that the region will eventually face a referendum on independence. Kherson was the first major Ukrainian city to be occupied by the

⁶ <https://t.me/stranaua/41338>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1524438980191731717>



Russian military after the invasion, and the Ukrainian mayor was removed after refusing to cooperate with the occupation authorities. The occupation administration has reportedly replaced Ukrainian television and radio with Russian programs, blocked Ukrainian internet service providers, and started replacing Ukrainian currency with the Russian ruble as of May 1, 2022.⁸

⁸ <https://ria.ru/20220511/regiony-1787818820.html>



Appendix: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

Red

WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?

Sources may use TLP:

RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.

HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?

Recipients may NOT share TLP:

RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.

Amber

Sources may use TLP:

AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.

Recipients may ONLY share TLP:

AMBER information with members of their own organization and only as widely as necessary to act on that information.

Green

WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?

Sources may use TLP:

GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.

HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?

Recipients may share TLP:

GREEN information with peers & partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.

White

Sources may use TLP:

WHITE when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.

Recipients may share TLP:

WHITE information without restriction, subject to copy-right controls.