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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

Russia is preparing an offensive in southeastern Ukraine with the goal of conquering the entirety of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely seek to showcase a significant military victory at the Victory Day celebrations on May 9, 2022. U.S. President Joseph Biden committed to a new USD 800 million military assistance package to Ukraine that includes the first deliveries of U.S. artillery and conventional weapons. Mariupol is close to falling to Russian forces, but widespread claims of a large Ukrainian surrender and the Russian use of chemical weapons are unverified.

Analyst Commentary

Russia has withdrawn its remaining military forces from Ukraine's northern and northeastern regions in preparation for a renewed offensive in the southeastern Donetsk Basin (Donbas). The Ukrainian government has warned that Russia has nearly completed preparations for a new offensive, and the head of Ukraine's Luhansk military administration estimated on April 7, 2022, that the campaign would begin in the coming days.¹ Satellite imagery has also shown another large military convoy moving toward Russia's border with eastern Ukraine, likely to support the coming offensive.²

Army General Alexander Dvornikov, commander of Russia's Southern Military District, was recently appointed to lead the Russian military effort in Ukraine. He is presumed to be the theater commander, which may indicate that Russia is changing its military approach to the conflict; in contrast, the initial invasion featured a divided effort on multiple axes. The next phase of the war will likely be more conventional in

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/167c6cfb-44c3-41d4-b071-ea28ae520901>

² <https://twitter.com/Maxar/status/1514016232885964810>



nature, with each military defending and counter attacking against more fixed positions. Prior to the invasion on February 24, 2022, part of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were occupied by Russia-backed separatists, and Russia's objective in this phase of the war will be the full conquest of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

On May 9, 2022, Russia will celebrate Victory Day—the holiday that commemorates its WWII victory over Nazi Germany. The holiday is symbolically important to Russian leadership and is used to showcase the country's military. It is possible that President Putin will seek to use the holiday to celebrate a significant military victory in Ukraine, which may influence the next phase of the fighting. Domestically, the war is still referred to as a “special military operation” with the limited objective of “liberating” the Donbas. While it is clear that President Putin's political objectives were much greater initially, success in the forthcoming operation could be legitimately sold to the Russian public as achieving one of the campaign's main objectives. President Putin would rhetorically fulfill a second major objective—the “denazification” of Ukraine—if Russian forces are victorious in Mariupol. The city is the base of the nationalist Azov Battalion that is the focus of most pro-Russian claims that Nazis control Ukraine, and Mariupol will likely fall before the holiday.

The course the war will take after Victory Day is difficult to anticipate, as it will depend on the outcome of the Russian offensive in the Donbas. If the Russian military succeeds, Russian leadership may renew ceasefire negotiations with Ukraine from a position of strength. However, President Putin may also resume his efforts to conquer Kyiv. The Ukrainian government reportedly believes that he has not given up his original goal of taking Kyiv, and the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, said that an offensive to fully occupy Ukraine would resume after a military victory in the Donbas.³

International Response

President Biden again spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on April 13, 2022, and pledged an additional USD 800 million in military assistance. As Russia shifts its forces to the Donbas, a more conventional military confrontation between armies is expected to follow, and President Zelensky has requested more conventional weapons to support his military's efforts. The new USD 800 million package will include 18 155mm Howitzers and 40,000 artillery rounds, 200 M113 armored personnel carriers, 300 Switchblade Tactical “kamikaze” UAVs, and 11 Mi-17 helicopters.⁴ This is the first time that the United States has committed to provide artillery support to Ukraine during the conflict.

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/chechen-chief-kadyrov-says-russian-forces-will-take-kyiv-2022-04-11/>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/MarcusReports/status/1514315795035299850/photo/1>



Prime Minister Sanna Marin announced on April 13, 2022, that Finland would decide in the next few weeks whether it would apply to join NATO. The announcement came at a joint press conference with Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, which suggests that Sweden is also close to making a decision about applying to join the alliance. Sweden has traditionally been neutral in regards to military alliances, but both countries take part in NATO military exercises and share intelligence with NATO. Recent polls in Finland and Sweden suggest that popular support for NATO membership has dramatically increased since Russia's February invasion of Ukraine. NATO will hold a summit in June that could detail the future of the alliance.⁵

An increasing number of European heads of state and government are traveling to Kyiv to visit President Zelensky and show their support for Ukraine. On April 9, 2022, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson toured Kyiv with the Ukrainian president and pledged more military support. The presidents of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland also visited Kyiv on April 13, 2022. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier planned to make the same visit but canceled the trip due to his belief that he "wasn't wanted in Kyiv." The German newspaper *Bild Zeitung* had earlier reported that President Zelensky said he would refuse to meet with the German president due to his close relations with Russia prior to the war.⁶

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer traveled to the Ukrainian capital on April 9, 2022, and went to Moscow two days later to speak with President Putin. Chancellor Nehammer's meeting with the Russian president was the first by an EU leader since the war started, and he reportedly left the conversation believing that President Putin intends to continue the war, despite the high cost of sanctions to the Russian economy.

Physical Security Impacts

Fighting in the southeastern salient continues just south of Izyum, in Rubizhne to the northwest of Severodonetsk, and near Popasna. Russian attacks on these fronts have been relatively minor and unsuccessful in recent weeks, but the Russian military is believed to be strengthening its forces in preparation for a renewed assault. A Russian offensive will likely begin in the coming days, given the redeployment of forces and the aforementioned May 9, 2022, deadline to achieve a positive military result that can be presented to the Russian public. Russian forces also continue to threaten Kharkiv—now the largest Ukrainian city on the front lines of the war—but Russia is not expected to attempt to capture the city.

Mariupol has not yet fallen to the Russian military, but Russian forces continue to squeeze the territory held by the Ukrainian defenders. Russia claimed that more than

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<https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/13/finland-to-make-nato-membership-decision-in-weeks-rather-than-months>

⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/eac064fe-713a-4a4d-ab70-e9cba835c355>



1,000 Ukrainian defenders surrendered on April 13, 2022, but this claim has not been verified. Allegations by the Azov Battalion that Russia dropped chemical weapons on Mariupol on April 11, 2022, that caused respiratory and neurological effects are also unverified. The claim spread quickly on social media, but Western officials have reacted much more cautiously to the claim given its significance and the difficulty of verifying information that comes from Mariupol.⁷

The battleship *Moskva*, the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, was severely damaged on April 13, 2022, when a fire broke out on the ship. According to Ukrainian officials, the vessel was struck by two Neptune anti-ship missiles while anchored off the port of Sevastopol in Crimea. Russian officials have not confirmed Ukrainian reporting about the *Moskva* being struck by missiles but said that a fire on the ship caused an ammunition explosion.⁸ Initial reporting suggests that the *Moskva* has been rendered inoperable, which would be a significant loss for the Russian navy.

Russia struck a railway station in Kramatorsk on April 8, 2022, killing at least 59 people. Kramatorsk is located in the northern part of the Donetsk region, and the main railway hub was crowded with civilians attempting to evacuate from the city. President Zelensky said SS-21 (Tochka-U) short-range ballistic missiles were used for the strike. Russian officials initially said their military was striking railway stations that were hosting Ukrainian reserves and armaments, but they later walked back this statement and called the missile strikes a Ukrainian “provocation.”⁹

⁷ https://twitter.com/Polk_Azov/status/1513596048983441408

⁸ <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1514397537093235074>

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<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3457246-death-toll-from-russian-missile-strike-on-kramatorsk-train-station-grows-to-59.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 copyright controls.