



News Brief Update 52

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Russia's war with Ukraine (Update covering the period 5-31 October)

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Overview

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began in the spring of 2014 with Moscow's annexation of Crimea and was transformed by Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, shows no sign of ending. It has been for some months now widely characterized as a grinding war of attrition, as the casualties, destruction and collateral damage have reached proportions not seen since World War II. Ukraine's summer offensive appears to have stalled while Russia's biggest offensive in months on the eastern Ukrainian town of Avdiivka in the Donetsk region also appeared to be [failing](#).

The stalemate is unlikely to be broken by the delivery to Ukraine of an undisclosed number of US long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS). President Zelensky [confirmed](#) on 17 October that Kyiv has already deployed the ATACMS, which can strike targets more than 100 miles away and deliver salvos with cluster munitions. They were probably [used](#) to strike airfields in Russian-held territory in eastern and southern Ukraine, destroying helicopters, knocking out an air defence missile launcher and damaging runways. On the 18 October President Putin [called](#) the supply of ATACMS "another mistake by the United States" and claimed that it would "simply prolong [Ukraine's] agony". While they may help Ukraine even-up the battlefield, like earlier high-profile transfers of tanks, cluster munitions and combat aircraft (the latter mainly just pledges for now), the ATACMS are unlikely to prove decisive, even if supplied in larger numbers.

For developments in NATO: see the separate *NATO Watch Observatory No.59*

With attention shifting to the growing conflict in the Middle East and the war in Ukraine largely stalemated, war fatigue and revolt appears to be growing on multiple fronts. First, with Russian forces [reportedly](#) suffering some of its [highest casualty rates of 2023](#) in seeking to capture Avdiivka, the morale of Russian forces is likely to be low. The White House even [claimed](#) on 26 October that Russia was executing soldiers who failed to follow orders and was threatening entire units with death if they retreat from Ukrainian artillery fire.

Second, the lack of a breakthrough in Ukraine's summer offensive suggests that morale among the Ukrainian forces is also likely to be subdued. As an indication of Ukrainian weariness with the war, protesters gathered on the streets of Ukrainian cities on 27 October to [demand](#) a cap of 18 months on mandatory military service. Given that it has fewer troops and less ammunition, and faces major obstacles in attempting to recover occupied territory, Kyiv will need to [fight carefully](#) just to maintain the status quo, let alone regain the initiative. There is also a danger that in pursuing a strategy of complete victory encouraged by Washington and NATO, Ukrainian forces will become so depleted that it eventually opens the way for a Russian counterattack that costs Ukraine much more territory.

Third, international 'Ukraine fatigue' appears to be growing among Ukraine's allies, both within governments and more widely among the public in North America and Europe. Economic hardship in Europe as a result of the war and sanctions is leading to social and political unrest, including electoral support for extreme right parties (as witnessed in state elections in [Germany](#) and the national election in [Slovakia](#)). And in the United States, recent [political turmoil](#) over the election of a new Speaker of the US House of Representatives has added to jitters over the future of military funding for Ukraine. Although European leaders [rallied](#) around Ukraine at the European political community summit in Spain on 5 October, the gap between Ukrainian hopes and what the West can deliver (including on EU

and NATO membership) also appears to be growing.

Despite the bloody stalemate and this growing war weariness, diplomacy to end the war remains stalled.

Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure

Russian missile and artillery attacks on civilian infrastructure have continued, and the following list is just a sample of some of the most devastating in terms of civilian loss of life during this recent period. Six people were killed in a Russian [missile strike](#) on a postal distribution centre in Kharkiv district on 21 October. The attack was condemned by the US ambassador to Ukraine, Bridget Blink, who wrote on X: "The Kremlin's disregard for life is for all the world to see". Russian attacks on 18-19 October killed at least 10 civilians in Ukraine and damaged the power grid in the north-eastern city of Kharkiv, Ukrainian officials [said](#). A Russian missile struck a school in the town of Nikopol in the central Ukrainian region of Dnipropetrovsk on 11 October, killing at least four people, Ukrainian officials [said](#).

At least 52 people were killed by a Russian [missile strike](#) on a cafe and grocery store in Hroza village in Kharkiv province on 5 October, while the next day, a 10-year-old boy and his grandmother were killed and more than 20 people wounded after a Russian missile [attack](#) on an apartment block in Kharkiv. President Zelensky accused Russia of "genocidal aggression" after the attack on Hroza, describing it as "a demonstrably brutal Russian crime – a rocket attack on an ordinary grocery store, a completely deliberate act of terrorism".

Ukrainian attacks inside Russia and in Crimea

Kyiv has launched increasingly frequent drone and missile attacks on targets in southern Russia and in Russia-annexed Crimea (see NATIO Watch Updates 47-51). These attacks, far beyond the frontlines, appear to be

escalating and are regarded as powerful propaganda for Ukraine, although Kyiv rarely claims responsibility for the attacks directly – although this was not the case for several attacks in Crimea during September (see NATO Watch [Update 51](#)). Debris from a drone downed by anti-aircraft units over southern Russia's Belgorod region [killed](#) three people and injured at least one, the regional governor said on 12 October. Journalist Khaybar Akifi was severely wounded in the drone attack that also killed his four-year-old daughter and his wife's parents.

The risk of NATO's direct involvement in the war

Romanian authorities [said](#) on 12 October they had found a crater from a suspected drone that may have exploded on impact on its territory near the border with Ukraine, reviving concerns about possible spillover of Russia's war in Ukraine on to a NATO member country. While the war in Ukraine is mostly concentrated in the east along the country's border with Russia, the borders of NATO members to Ukraine's north and west are increasingly becoming destabilised. Mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group had earlier moved into Belarus, and Russia has been striking Ukrainian port facilities on the left bank of the Danube, just across the river from Romania. NATO members in Eastern Europe have been [responding](#) to the increased threat by deploying extra troops and boosting equipment, including combat aircraft and air defences.

Stalled diplomacy

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 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 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.

Ukrainian-backed talks in Malta

A third round of Ukrainian-backed [peace talks](#) among national security and policy advisors took place in Malta on 29-30 October, but without Moscow. In a statement afterwards President Zelensky, said 66 countries had taken part, proof that his plan "has gradually become global". It follows similar meetings in Jeddah (in August) and Copenhagen (in June), where Ukraine has been building international support for its peace proposals, see NATO Watch [Update 50](#). The August meeting was notable mostly for the presence of Chinese officials, who were absent from the June meeting.

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. Prior to the latest round of talks, Russia [criticised](#) them, warning any discussions without its participation would be counterproductive. Foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said on 26 October that the upcoming meeting had "nothing to do with the search for a peaceful resolution" and criticised Malta for hosting what she called a "blatantly anti-Russian event".

Also in Malta, Ukraine and the Netherlands began [talks](#) on a bilateral agreement on security guarantees. Following the United States, the UK, Canada, Japan, and France, it is the sixth country to start bilateral negotiations with Ukraine on security guarantees.

Parliamentary summit of the Crimea Platform

On 24 October parliamentary representatives from over 50 countries met in Prague for the [second parliamentary summit of the Crimea Platform](#). The initiative was created by President Zelensky in 2021 to keep the political focus on the Ukrainian peninsula that was annexed by Russia in 2014. The participants approved a [joint declaration](#) calling for the creation of Crimea Platform support groups in signatory countries. In a video [address](#) to the forum participants, President Zelensky said "our goal is complete de-occupation of our land, including Crimea". Since the annexation an estimated 140,000 Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians have left the peninsula to mostly settle in other parts of Ukraine, while up to 1 million ethnic Russians have moved there.

Discussions in the OSCE

According to the Foreign Minister of North Macedonia, Bujar Osmani, Moscow can expect more diplomatic pressure from the 57-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). North Macedonia country currently holds the rotating presidency of the OSCE, and on 16 October Osmani [urged](#) Russia to cease its attacks on Ukraine and withdraw its forces. Ukraine has called for Russia to be excluded from the OSCE, warning that the body faces a "slow death" if Moscow remained a member. The OSCE was founded to ease tensions between east and west during the cold war, and helps its members coordinate on issues like human rights and arms control.

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 [announced](#) additional security assistance for Ukraine on 26 October valued at \$150 million. The latest package "utilizes assistance previously authorised for Ukraine during prior fiscal years", the Pentagon said in a statement. The US army had [said](#) on 9 October that Congress needed to approve additional funding quickly to ensure the Pentagon's munitions production and acquisition plans could meet the needs of both Israel and Ukraine simultaneously. Army Secretary Christine Wormuth made the comments as the US House of Representatives was effectively paralysed as Republicans worked to select a new speaker. Meanwhile, at the White House, John Kirby, spokesperson for the national security council, [emphasised](#) that the US government had existing funding to support both Israel and Ukraine: "We are a

large enough, big enough, economically viable and vibrant enough country to be able to support both [Israel and Ukraine]”.

It was [reported](#) on 5 October that the United States will transfer thousands of seized Iranian weapons and rounds of ammunition to Ukraine. It is unclear what legal authorities the US will use to facilitate the weapons’ transfer – currently, seized weapons must be destroyed or stored, according to the UN.

New European and other announcements

Ukraine expects Germany to provide it with an additional €1.4 billion in military assistance to enhance air defences for a second winter at war with Russia, Ukraine’s Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal [said](#) on 24 October. Germany had already [announced](#) on 10 October an additional €1 billion in military aid for Ukraine. This “winter package” included an extra Patriot air defence system, as well as two more Iris-T air defence missile systems capable of short- and medium-range protection. Germany will also [reportedly](#) provide an additional €200 million to Ukraine to support the country’s restoration of its education and healthcare systems, its drinking water supplies, and the reconstruction of its cities.

On the 17 October the European Parliament [approved](#) \$53 billion more aid for Ukraine over the next four years to help with reconstruction. EU-Ukrainian negotiations are now due to start with EU member states on the final details of the [Ukraine Facility](#).

Australia [said](#) on 26 October that it will send a 3D metal printer and anti-drone systems to Ukraine as part of a \$12.8 million military assistance package. Prime minister Anthony Albanese said “Australia remains steadfast in supporting Ukraine to defend itself against Russia’s illegal and immoral invasion”. It takes the country’s total aid to about \$582 million since Russia invaded.

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 first Netherlands-donated F-16 will arrive in Romania’s training centre within two weeks, outgoing Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte [said](#) on 30 October. Belgium Defence Minister Ludivine 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. The offer, included in a [\\$200 million package](#) of military support to Ukraine that consisted mainly of 155-millimeter calibre ammunition and spare parts to earlier donated systems, was the latest move in an ongoing diplomatic effort to persuade Turkey to drop its objection to Sweden joining the military alliance (see below).

Support for Ukraine’s defence sector

Ukraine has set up a joint defence venture with German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall AG to service and repair western weapons sent to help Kyiv against Russia’s full-scale invasion, officials [said](#) on 24 October. This followed the first meeting of the International Defence Industry Forum in Kyiv in 29 September 2023, where Ukraine signed 20 [agreements](#) and memorandums with foreign partners on the manufacture of drones and the repair and production of armoured vehicles and ammunition (see NATO Watch [Update 51](#)).

Domestic drone production sought by Russia and Ukraine

The war in Ukraine is the first armed conflict to see such extensive use of drones, which are used by both sides. Many of them are commercially made in China and bought off the shelf, and new supplies are vital because of the large numbers lost in the fighting. Ukraine [said](#) on 25 October that it was aiming to increase domestic manufacture of its own drones, producing tens of thousands every month by the end of the year. Kyiv has relied heavily on foreign-made drones in the war so far but is looking to ramp up domestic output, in part because it fears a [drone shortage](#) due to China's move to place restrictions on exports. Russia's drones are mostly sourced from China and Iran, and Moscow will spend more than \$618 million on a new national project to make them itself, Russia's finance minister, Anton Siluanov, [said](#) on 16 October. "The task is that 41% of all drones by 2025 should have the label 'Made in Russia'. Today, drones are mainly from the People's Republic of China".

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](#). Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran on 23 October. Russia and Iran firmed up bilateral relations in a "trusting" atmosphere, Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a [statement](#). US military officials [displayed](#) what they said were pieces of Iranian drones recovered in Ukraine to UN member states on 12 October – evidence, according to the Pentagon, of growing ties between Iran and Russia. Tehran has denied western accusations that it is supplying Russia with large quantities of drones, some armed, to use in its invasion of Ukraine.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un said he wants to build a "forward-looking" relationship with Russia as he met with Foreign Minister Lavrov, state media [reported](#) on 19 October. The two-day visit was expected to lay the groundwork for a future trip to the country by Putin. The White House national security council

spokesperson John Kirby [claimed](#) on 13 October that North Korea has delivered more than 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions to Russia for the war in Ukraine. Kirby said the US believed Kim was seeking sophisticated Russian weapon technologies in return for the munitions to boost North Korea's nuclear programme. A [report](#) by the UK-based Royal United Services Institute highlighted dozens of high-resolution images taken in recent months to support these claims that Russia has likely opened a new supply route and has begun shipping large supplies of North Korean munitions.

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 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 58,585 conflict-related fatalities in Ukraine between 24 February 2022 and 27 October 2023: 29,514 in battles; 27,726 in explosions/remote violence; 1,338 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 327 conflict-related fatalities: 134 in explosions/remote violence; 87 in battles; 58 in violence against civilians; and 48 in strategic developments.

The number of battlefield casualties in Ukraine is approaching nearly 500,000 Russian and Ukrainian soldiers, US officials told the [New York Times](#) in August. Russia's military casualties are approaching 300,000, the

officials claimed, with as many as 120,000 killed in action. 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. In an earlier intelligence update on 11 October, the UK MoD [said](#) that the Russian military was facing a “mental health crisis”, with many personnel suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

According to the New York Times report in August, Ukraine was said to have close to 70,000 killed and 100,000-120,000 wounded. This casualty data also suggested a dramatic escalation in the war over the past year, with the rate of combined casualties increasing from 20,000 per month to more than 33,000 per month in the war’s current phase. 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 300,000 Russian soldiers in the war to date. 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.

According to [data](#) collected by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as at 24 September, 9,701 civilians have died since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. The actual civilian casualty figures are likely to be considerably higher, as 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 17,317 people by 20 October. From this number, 5,157 were killed and 12,160 were injured. Ninety-five per cent (16,441) of civilian casualties have occurred in populated areas.

Landmines

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. 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 6,218,800 as of 22 October, down from 8,207,977 on 9 May.

Continuing concerns over nuclear power plants

A drone attack by Russia near Ukraine’s Khmelnytskyi nuclear power plant temporarily cut power to some off-site radiation monitoring stations, the International Atomic Energy Agency [said](#) on 25 October. “This incident again underlines the extremely precarious nuclear safety situation in Ukraine,” said the IAEA’s Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi. In his nightly [address](#), President Zelensky accused Russia of targeting the power plant. “It is most likely that the target for these drones was the Khmelnytskyi nuclear power station. The shockwave from the explosion shattered windows, including on the nuclear power station’s premises,” he said. The attack involved 11 Shahed drones and injured 16 people according to local authorities. Power lines were also damaged, with two towns close to the nuclear power

plant, Netishyn and Slavuta, facing power cuts. Ukraine's air force said it stopped all the drones that were launched.

In an [interview](#) with the Guardian on 10 October Rafael Grossi said President Zelensky had promised him that Ukraine would not attack the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, Europe's biggest nuclear plant, as part of its counteroffensive against Russia. Grossi said he was most concerned about the nuclear plant becoming engulfed in fighting between the two sides, but insisted he had obtained a commitment from the Ukrainian president. Both Ukraine and Russia have repeatedly accused each other of endangering the safety of the plant.

Russian nuclear facilities also may be at risk. Russia's Foreign Ministry [claimed](#) a Ukrainian drone crashed into a nuclear waste storage facility at the Kursk nuclear power plant in western Russia on 26 October, damaging its walls.

Further reading:

On outcomes and consequences of the war

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[Russian Attacks Are Edging Closer and Closer to NATO Territory](#), Bloomberg, 7 October 2023

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[US NATO ambassador allays concerns over Ukraine aid](#), Deutsche Welle, 6 October 2023

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[Russian Official Proposes Invading Five NATO Countries](#), Newsweek, 5 October 2023

Anni Roth Hjermmann and Julie Wilhelmsen, [Misplaced Certainty: NATO Hostility as Collective Common Sense Within Russia's Leadership](#), E-International Relations, 5 October 2023

[Western ammo stocks at 'bottom of the barrel' as Ukraine war drags on, NATO official warns](#), CNN, 4 October 2023

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, [Poll: Americans split by party on whether Ukraine weapons aid 'worth it'](#), Responsible Statecraft, 4 October 2023

[NATO Secretary General stresses enduring support for Ukraine in call with President Biden, transatlantic leaders](#), NATO News Release, 3 October 2023

James A. Green, [The provision of weapons and logistical support to Ukraine and the jus ad bellum](#), *Journal on the Use of Force and International Law*, vol.10 no.1, pp. 3-16, 2023

On the risk of nuclear war

Russia withdraws ratification of CTBT

Russia claimed on 25 October that it had tested its ability to deliver a [retaliatory nuclear strike](#) in an exercise involving the launch of missiles by land, sea and air. News of the exercise was delivered on Russian state TV by the Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu. The exercise followed Russia's parliament completing the [passing of a law](#) that withdraws Moscow's ratification of the global treaty banning nuclear weapons tests, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Russia's upper house, the Federation Council, approved the law by 156 votes to zero, after the lower house, the Duma, had also passed it unanimously. Russia says it is revoking its withdrawal of the treaty only to bring itself in line with the United States, which signed but never ratified the treaty.

Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organisations

in Vienna, had posted on X on 6 October that Russia was planning to revoke ratification of the CTBT, "The aim is to be on equal footing with the US, who signed the treaty but didn't ratify it," he [said](#). "Revocation doesn't mean the intention to resume nuclear tests". The US warned that Russia revoking its ratification of the treaty will endanger "the global norm" against nuclear testing. A day earlier on 5 October President Putin ramped up his own nuclear rhetoric when he [suggested](#) that Russia could resume nuclear testing for the first time in more than three decades. He also said that Russia had successfully tested the nuclear-powered, nuclear-capable Burevestnik strategic cruise missile.

Robert Floyd, the executive secretary of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty Organization - the international watchdog on nuclear tests - raised [concerns](#) about Russian intentions after Putin's remarks. "It would be concerning and deeply unfortunate if any state signatory were to reconsider its ratification of the CTBT," Floyd said on 6 October.

During his press conference at the NATO Defence Ministers meeting in Brussels on 11 October (see below), the NATO Secretary General [said](#): "Russia's nuclear rhetoric throughout this conflict has been, and continues to be, reckless and dangerous. And Russia must know that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Of course, we continue to watch what Russia is doing very closely. So far, we haven't seen any changes in their nuclear posture that require any changes in our nuclear posture. But of course, Russia's announcement on revoking ratification of the comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, demonstrates Russia's lack of respect, and the continued disregard for its international commitments". Stoltenberg added that "NATO allies have upheld this norm against nuclear testing for over 25 years and we have no plans to start testing again. Putin is trying to use nuclear blackmail to intimidate and coerce. He tries to use this nuclear rhetoric to prevent NATO allies from supporting Ukraine, but he will not succeed".

President Putin announced on 21 February that Moscow would suspend its participation in the New START treaty, threatening the end of the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia, while the United States [announced](#) on 1 June that it will stop providing Russia with some notifications required under the treaty, including updates on missile and launcher locations.

Risks of a direct military confrontation and nuclear weapons use

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.

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.

Artin Dersimonian, [Our nuclear guardrails are slowly melting away](#), Responsible Statecraft, 24 October 2023

Matthew Evangelista, [Oppenheimer envisioned the tactical use of nuclear weapons. Putin now threatens it](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 23 October 2023

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[NATO Will Hold Major Nuclear Exercise As Russia Plans To Pull Out Of Test-Ban Treaty](#), RFE/RL, 12 October 2023

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On investigation of war crimes in Ukraine

The latest [report](#) by the [Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine](#), published on 20 October, found additional evidence that Russian forces had committed “indiscriminate attacks” with explosive weapons, resulting in deaths, injuries and the destruction and damage of civilian objects. It also documents war crimes in Ukraine, including rape and the deportation of children to Russia.

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 the box in NATO Watch [Update 50](#).

Dossiers of evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine were [presented](#) to German federal prosecutors on 26 October at the start of a campaign to use the principle of universal jurisdiction to bring war criminals to justice. The cases were filed by the Clooney Foundation for Justice, representing 16 survivors and the families of victims in three separate war crimes cases. Meanwhile, the National Police of Ukraine has [documented](#) nearly 100,000 war crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine, according to Ivan Vyhovsky, the head of the body. Speaking to Interfax-Ukraine, Vyhovsky said the evidence being gathered would form the basis of future attempts to prosecute the perpetrators.

The EU judicial agency [Eurojust](#) is coordinating an international team of prosecutors from several European countries, Ukraine, the United States and the International Criminal Court that is seeking to put senior Russian officials on trial over the Ukraine invasion. The team has already gathered “thousands” of pieces of evidence, Ladislav Hamran, the head of Eurojust [said](#) on 11 October. Set up just three months ago, the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression (ICPA) aims to plug a hole in international law laid bare by Russia’s February 2022 invasion.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [warned](#) on 9 October that there is no system to return Ukrainian children taken to Russia since Moscow’s invasion of the country, and that some of those who did return had reported mistreatment. Ukrainian authorities say they have identified and verified almost 20,000 children who have been taken to Russia during the war.

The parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe on 12 October [recognised](#) the 1930s starvation of millions in Ukraine under Soviet leader Joseph Stalin a “genocide”. The text on the 1932-33 “Holodomor” was voted through almost unanimously with 73 votes in favour

and one against at the meeting in Strasbourg, which followed a similar resolution approved by the European Parliament in December.

On the Black Sea grain agreement and global food security

Ukraine is continuing to search for safe alternatives for its grain exports following Russia’s [withdrawal](#) from the UN and Türkiye - brokered Black Sea grain initiative in July (see NATO Watch [Update 49](#)). Kyiv established a temporary “humanitarian corridor” along the western Black Sea coast near Romania and Bulgaria to export grain and at least 10 cargo ships have completed the journey through it. Russia has responded by [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.

Ukraine denied reports by Ukrainian and British firms that the new Black Sea export corridor had been suspended. “The information regarding the cancellation or unscheduled stoppage of the temporary #Ukrainian-corridor for the movement of civilian vessels from and to the ports of the Big Odesa (region) is false,” Deputy Prime Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov [said](#) on 26 October. Earlier on 4 October, Ukraine’s navy [said](#) that 12 more vessels were ready to enter the Black Sea shipping corridor on their way towards Ukrainian ports, and that 10 other vessels were ready to depart from the country’s ports. Meanwhile, the UK [accused](#) Russia of plotting to sabotage civilian tankers loaded with Ukrainian grain by planting sea mines on the approaches to the country’s Black Sea ports. Based on what it said was declassified intelligence, the UK said on 4 October that Russia did not want to directly attack merchant ships using Ukraine’s humanitarian corridor with missiles, but instead would try to destroy them covertly.

Ukraine increased its road shipments of agricultural goods in September, [according](#) to Spike Brokers, a commercial agent broker on

the grain and oil market of Ukraine. In September, 514,000 metric tons of agricultural goods were exported by lorries, while in August, 506,000 tons were exported. The increase is still down from the year before, which saw 639,000 tons in September 2022.

A senior UN trade official Rebeca Grynspan [met](#) with Russian officials in Moscow on 9 October for talks aimed at enabling the “unimpeded access” to global markets for grain and fertiliser from Russia and Ukraine, a UN spokesperson said. But despite such discussions and calls to reactivate the Black Sea grain agreement, there is no immediate prospect of this happening.

On sanctions against Russia and post-war reconstruction in Ukraine

The World Bank has [estimated](#) that Ukraine would need over \$400 billion for reconstruction in the next decade. Some of this reconstruction could be paid from seizing Russian frozen assets in the EU. The European Council has [outlined](#) plans to seize the profits from frozen Russian assets and direct billions of euros to support Ukraine. In a set of [formal public conclusions](#) after the culmination of an EU leaders’ summit, it said that “extraordinary revenues held by private entities stemming directly from Russia’s immobilised assets” could be directed to support Ukraine and its recovery. Of around \$300 billion of Russian foreign reserves frozen by countries participating in sanctions at the onset of Moscow’s war on Ukraine, the majority — more than €200 billion — sit in the EU. Meanwhile, the US on 23 October [sought](#) forfeiture of a \$300m superyacht, Amadea, that it says is controlled by sanctioned billionaire Russian oligarch Suleiman Kerimov. The yacht was seized in Fiji and is docked in San Diego. The case is before court in Manhattan.

Finland’s Ministry of Defence [said](#) on 19 October it had blocked three planned property transactions involving Russian buyers on grounds that allowing the acquisitions to take place could hamper the defence of Finnish territory.

Kazakhstan has banned exports to Russia of 106 goods that could be used in the Ukraine war after the ex-Soviet state vowed not to help its ally circumvent western sanctions, reports [said](#) on 19 October. On a visit to Berlin last month, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said his country will “follow the sanctions regime”, amid suspicions Moscow is still receiving vital goods via Kazakhstan.

The International Olympic Committee on 12 October [suspended](#) the Russian Olympic Committee for recognising regional organisations from four territories annexed from Ukraine. Russia’s National Olympic Committee denounced the decision, calling it counterproductive and politically motivated.

Sanctions – an overview

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine spurred the US, UK and EU, and a handful of other Western-aligned countries, to impose a series of [sanctions](#) meant to punish Vladimir Putin’s government and pressure him to pull his forces back. 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 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 has [enacted](#) the authority to do so.

Yuliya M. Ziskina, [The REPO Act: Confiscating Russian State Assets Consistent With U.S. and International Law](#), Lawfare, 12 October 2023

Inna Dzhurynska and Luke Cooper, [Is the ‘Buy Ukrainian’ policy legal?](#) An outline analysis of how EU and WTO law permits Ukraine to declare a national security exception to pursue a preferential procurement policy, Policy Brief, Conflict and Civicness Research Group, 25 September 2023

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

Europe is striving to diversify its energy supply sources to curb its dependence on Russia. Gas shortages occurred across Europe during 2022 but now appear to have eased. The EU is on track towards its goal of ending its reliance on Russian fossil fuels within this decade, the European Commission [said](#) on 24 October. Russia's Gazprom, looking to compensate for the loss of most of its European markets, will supply [extra gas](#) to Hungary and China this year.

Questions continue as to who blew up the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. 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](#). Meanwhile, 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 German magazine Der Spiegel in August).

On China's position on the war

President Putin met his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in Beijing for [talks](#) on 18 October. It was the Russian president's first trip outside the former Soviet Union since the International Criminal Court issued a [warrant](#) for him in March over the deportation of children from Ukraine. 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.

On developments within Russia

Russian lawmakers backed a record [increase in military spending](#) to fund Moscow's offensive on Ukraine, in a first reading of the bill on 26 October. Military spending will account for almost a third of all outlays in 2024 – up 68% to 10.8tn rubles (\$115bn). Meanwhile, trade between Russia and India in the first eight months of 2023 more than doubled from the previous year, reaching a record high of almost \$44bn, Russian state-run media [reported](#).

President Putin [claimed](#) on 5 October that the plane crash that killed Wagner mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin in August was caused by hand grenades detonating inside the aircraft, not by a missile attack. "Fragments of hand grenades were found in the bodies of those killed in the crash. There was no external impact on the plane – this is already an established fact," he said.

Russia has continued its crackdown against critics at home and abroad. Russia detained three lawyers of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny and raided their homes, aides [said](#) on 14 October. The move was an attempt to "completely isolate Navalny," his ally Ivan Zhdanov said on social media.

French prosecutors on 12 October [opened](#) an investigation into the possible poisoning of an exiled Russian journalist Marina Ovsyannikova who staged a high-profile protest against the war in Ukraine. by holding up up a placard reading “Stop the war” on Russian television last year. Marina Ovsyannikova became unwell after opening the door to her apartment in Paris and finding a powdered substance, AFP reported. Ovsyannikova was [sentenced](#) to eight-and-a-half years in jail by a Russian court in absentia on 4 October. She was found guilty of “spreading knowingly false information about the Russian armed forces”, according to a statement posted by the court on Telegram.

Russia was defeated in its bid to return to the UN’s Human Rights Council, with Albania and Bulgaria winning more votes at the General Assembly. In the secret ballot vote on 9 October, Bulgaria received 160 votes, Albania 123 and Russia 83 votes. The Human Rights Council voted in April 2022 to suspend Moscow after its invasion of Ukraine.

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

The Security Service of Ukraine [sent an indictment](#) to the court on 20 October against the former abbot of the Ukrainian Orthodox monastery Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. Authorities charged Pavel with the violation of the equality of citizens, and justification, recognition as legitimate or denial of the armed aggression of Russia against Ukraine. It came a day after Ukraine’s parliament [voted](#) overwhelmingly to advance legislation seen as effectively banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church over its ties to Moscow, despite the church’s insistence it is fully independent and supportive of Ukraine’s fight against Russia.

Ukraine has recovered 14 archaeological items allegedly stolen by a Russian man, from Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory, authorities [announced](#) on 20 October. The return of the artefacts is a small victory amid the widespread destruction and pillaging of historical sites and treasures that has accompanied the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities have estimated total losses as being in the hundreds of millions of euros, and the Ministry of Culture reports that the number of buildings of cultural value damaged or destroyed has reached at least 623. After Ukrainian forces liberated the city of Kherson, authorities discovered 16,000 items missing from the art museum.

The destruction of the Kakhovka dam in south-eastern Ukraine in June caused \$14 billion worth of damage and losses, according to a [report](#) published by the Ukrainian Government and the UN in October.

Ukrainian World Congress, [NATO or EU Membership: Ukrainians Name Priority](#), 18 October 2023

Connor Echols, [Diplomacy Watch: Ukraine’s arduous path to EU accession](#), Responsible Statecraft, 6 October 2023

[NATO-Ukraine Council meets to take forward Vilnius Summit decisions](#), NATO News Release, 4 October 2023

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