

Ukraine

Flash Analysis and Prediction

07 April 2022



Russia's refocus on eastern Ukraine, following its stalled "special military operation" in the north, and accusations of war crimes against it, increases the likelihood of an "accidental" chemical weapons attack. This could be carried out against civilians in a smaller strategic town.

Summary

- Russian forces pulled back from Kyiv following a declaration that they would focus on the Donbas region.
- Evidence of "war crimes" was reported on 02/03 April after the Ukrainians retook Bucha.
- Widespread damage and destruction on health facilities suggest further war crimes from targeted and indiscriminate use of air strikes and artillery in many of the larger and besieged cities. These need further investigation.
- Russian attempts to link the eastern region of Donbas (see map) with the southern area of Crimea would allow it to concentrate on a smaller area,
- They need to take Mariupol to provide a land bridge, where civilians remain, despite international efforts to evacuate them. The Russians have now resorted to tried and tested methods of heavy artillery and air strikes.
- Ukraine accused Russian forces of carrying out "executions" in Irpin, Hostomel and Bucha, with at least 421 bodies found by 03 April.
- Evidence is emerging of sexual violence by armed forces targetting women and girls hiding in shelters.
- Russian denials of such reports of war crimes is an established modus operandi that the Kremlin has used in Chechnya, Grozny and Syria.
- Although Russia has been accused of considering the use of Chemical Weapons (CW), this is unlikely due to the risks to their own troops; they could look to fire white phosphorus or conventional high-explosives against a number of chemical plants.
- Likely that a protracted conflict will continue for many months yet before serious peace talks are considered by either side.
- Mariupol may still hold for several weeks to a month despite the warnings of an imminent collapse, though Russia will achieve a significant tactical advantage if it is able to capture Kramatorsk.
- Further Russian war crimes are likely to be uncovered as Ukrainian forces move further into northern Ukraine, however President Putin is highly unlikely to be indicted.
- The use of a supposedly "accidental" incident using CW continues to rise which will increase further if efforts by Russian ground forces stall once again in the East.

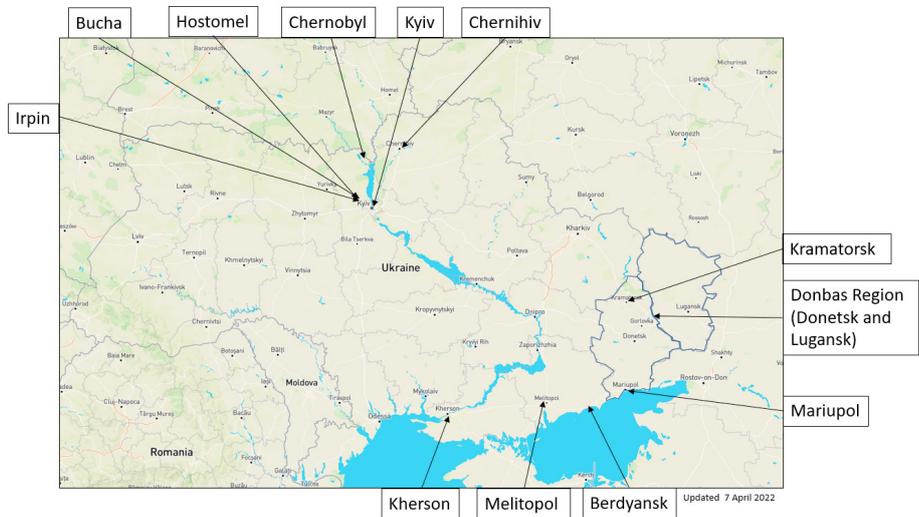
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Overview

Russian troops – including armour and artillery - started pulling back from Kyiv and Chernihiv on 31 March, as Ukrainian troops began to retake areas around the two cities.

This followed a 25 March declaration by Russia’s Defence Ministry that the first phase of its “Special military operation” was almost complete, and it would now focus on completely “liberating” the Donbas region.

In the meantime, evidence suggesting war crimes was reported on 02/03 April after the Ukrainians retook Bucha, 27 kilometres to the northwest of Kyiv.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also warned of the threat from retreating Russian forces leaving mined roads and booby-trapped corpses.



Analysis

Conflict/ Humanitarian

The failure of the initial Russian strategy to make a lightning move from Belarus using armour and paratroopers (Vozdushno-desantnye voyska Rossii or VDV) to take Antonov Airport, Hostomel, supported by air attacks against strategic sites across the country, has led to a much narrower refocus on eastern and southern Ukraine. Russian-backed separatists now claim to control at least 93 per cent of Luhansk and 54 percent of Donetsk area. The Russian army has consequently changed its strategy to focus on this smaller area due to losses of (according to US estimates) at least 10,000 out of its 190, 000 troops (150,000 Russian, 40,000 Russian backed militia), along with a wide range of armour, artillery pieces and aircraft. Indeed, one unit - the 4th Guards Tank “Kantemirovskaya” Division lost at least 46 of its estimated 220 T-80 tanks, whilst of the 120 Battalion Tactical Groups that went into Ukraine, at least 20 are now inoperative due to losses.

Russian attempts to link the eastern region of Donbas (see map) – with the southern area of Crimea and surrounding areas in Kherson, Melitopol and Berdyansk would allow it to concentrate its reduced force on a smaller area, whilst potentially allowing it to surround Ukrainian’s more experienced units in the east. It would also allow the Russian Defence Ministry to resupply from the eastern borders, and the Azov Sea – though there have also been specific threats to [Russian Naval vessels](#) (see appendix below). However, parts of the strategic town of Mariupol remain in Ukrainian hands. The Russians however need to take Mariupol to provide a land bridge between the Donbas region and Crimea.

The Russian failure to take the city quickly means that they have now reverted to tactics which they used alongside the Syrian Arab Army and Iranian backed militias against the Syrian enclave of Douma, Damascus in 2018. Douma held out for three months, with civilians living underground, as airstrikes and artillery destroyed the infrastructure, but was eventually evacuated following a chemical weapons attack.

Mariupol has seen similar destruction with over 85 per cent of the city reportedly now obliterated. At least 170,000 people remain in the city, and no water, electricity and food supplies been allowed in during the last three weeks, [while health care facilities](#) and [schools](#) have been bombed. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has attempted on several occasions to evacuate civilians where possible. Indeed, one of the largest attempts by the ICRC - a convoy of three cars, with nine staff members which was tasked to take 54 Ukrainian buses and a number of private vehicles out of the city was reported to have been turned around on 01 April. Since then, the ICRC have tried on several occasions to reach the city but have now reported that the latest attempt saw a team held (though eventually released after negotiations) and they are yet to reach the city. With the siege grinding on, concerns have been raised by the [US that chemical or biological weapons](#) may be used in Ukraine (see Diplomatic/ Humanitarian section below).

Meanwhile, Russian troops finally took the strategically important town of Izyum, 124 km from Kharkiv, and 195 km from Luhansk, on 01 April after three weeks of intense artillery bombardment and fighting. Around 20,000 Ukrainian troops and civilians remain in the town, and the Russians are unlikely to either allow them to leave or withdraw due to the town's elevated position over the surrounding area, which allows Russian forces the ability to limit any counter attacks. It also gives them the ability to control artillery fire into the Donbas region. Indeed, the Ukrainian military announced on 31 March that Russian forces appear to be gathering for a planned offensive towards the nearby regional capital of Kramatorsk, around 72 km from Izyum, thereby threatening the supply lines to Ukrainian troops in Donbas area.

Diplomatic/ Humanitarian

Ukrainian forces' recapture of key areas around Chernihiv city and north of Kyiv have uncovered reported evidence of war crimes emerging. Ukraine accused Russian forces of carrying out "executions" in Irpin, Hostomel and Bucha, with at least 421 bodies found by 03 April. On 4th March 2022, Ukraine's Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, spoke of multiple cases of sexual violence in occupied Ukrainian cities.

Rape As A Weapon of War

A new report on information of Russian soldiers breaking down the doors of cellars and basement where people were sheltering and raping women, will soon be published. Subscribe to Ukraine or Sexual Violence and Abuse [mailing list](#) to receive the briefing.

International outrage followed, with the UN Secretary General calling for an independent investigation whilst [UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet](#) stated that the reports raised "serious and disturbing questions about possible war crimes, grave breaches of international humanitarian law and serious violations of international human rights law". President Zelensky condemned the reports in emotive language as "concentrated evil" but had already pre-warned that withdrawing Russian forces would leave behind mined corpses and houses.

He is due to speak to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 05 April, but Russia is a permanent member of the UNSC, alongside China, and is all but certain to veto any official condemnation. Indeed, Russia denied the claimed deaths on 03 April with a [statement](#) calling the reports “another hoax”. Foreign Secretary Sergei Lavrov reiterated the comments a day later. The Russian denials of such reports of war crimes is an established modus operandi that the Kremlin has used in Chechnya, Grozny and Syria. Human Rights Watch accused it of [“unlawful attacks”](#) in Eastern Aleppo in December 2016 after Russian airstrikes hit civilian infrastructure including medical facilities, with munitions such as cluster bombs (which they have also been [accused](#) of using in Ukraine). Moscow, however, is not a signatory to the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions (although neither is Kyiv).

Attacks on Health Care in Ukraine

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February, Insecurity Insight has documented [83 incidents](#) of violence against health care, including 51 against health facilities and the deaths of 12 health workers. According to our monitoring, all but one incident was perpetrated by Russian forces. Russian forces have consistently failed to distinguish between military and civilian targets, including hospitals. **Taken together, these attacks represent a flagrant disregard for the protected status of health care in conflict.**

Ukrainian troops were reported to have shot Russian soldiers who had surrendered on 27 March, the Ukrainian government [stated](#) they took such reports “very seriously” and ordered an immediate investigation. Separate video however showed the same participants apparently rehearsing the incident suggesting that it was faked by Russian sympathisers. This contrasts to the continued denial of any possible war crimes by Moscow during the Ukrainian war. [Stills from another video](#) likely taken on or around 30 March near the village of Dmytrivka, around 10km miles southwest of Bucha, seemingly show local Ukrainian defence volunteers killing a wounded Russian prisoner following the ambush of a retreating VDV unit in which they were supported by Georgian volunteers.

Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden warned Russia on 25 March, that NATO “would respond” if Moscow used Chemical Weapons (CW) within Ukraine. Although reported war crimes have since overshadowed such concerns, there is a possibility that Russia could use CW against strategic cities or areas where troops are stalling, for example if Mariupol continues to hold. Ukrainian officials have alleged that Russian backed militia in Donetsk and Luhansk have already used white phosphorus as a chemical weapon although this is open to interpretation under international law (see below). The Head of the Popasana police, Oleksi Biloshytsky, reported on 13 March that Russian forces had used white phosphorus in his area (Popasana is 60 miles west of Lugansk City).

It is unlikely that Russia will use official chemical weapons such as Sarin (used to by the Government of Syria against Khan Shaykhun in April 2017), due to the risks to their own troops engaged in close combat – they could look to fire white phosphorous or conventional high-explosives against a number of ammonia and other chemical plants that are nearby civilian areas in the east. Indeed, a leak from an ammonia plant in Novoselytsia was reported after shelling on 21 March with civilians told to move away from the area or seek shelter. The Russian defence ministry accused Ukraine of staging “a [chemical flash flag](#)”. Ammonia is used as a fertiliser – but is also highly flammable as well as being corrosive and highly toxic gas. On 05 April, meanwhile, Russian shelling also hit a [store of nitric acid](#) In Rubizhne, Luhansk region releasing a cloud of toxic gas. Concerns remain that shelling could hit more factories holding such supplies with devastating results.



Predictions

Conflict / Humanitarian

- The re-focus on the east will provide Russia with a chance to resupply and reinforce its troops there. It will also allow the Russian army to attempt to encircle Ukraine's more battle hardened (after 12 years of conflict in the Donbas region) and well-trained troops. However, the Russians now have limited reserves of experienced forces. They may draw down forces from the Kaliningrad Oblast, an exclave on the Baltic that is surrounded by Poland and Lithuania, or from South Ossetia and Georgia. However, none of these troops are replacements for the VDV, nor will the equipment be of better quality. The Ukrainians also are running low on ammunition, particularly for heavy equipment such as tanks and air defences although they will have replenished some stocks with captured Russian supplies. It is therefore likely that a protracted conflict will ensue for many months yet before serious peace talks are considered by either side.
- Mariupol may still hold out for between several weeks to a month despite the warnings of an imminent collapse, with supplies including small arms ammunition still being sourced. Defenders are likely to continue resisting given that they know that they are likely to be killed out of hand if they surrender. Furthermore, urban warfare is slow, and protracted; indeed the siege of Aleppo lasted for two years. However, the civilian presence in the city will remain the key factor. If the ICRC can manage to evacuate those remaining (or the majority of them) – then the military defenders may be able to hold out longer. This likely means that the Russians will not wish to allow civilians to be evacuated. New war crimes are likely as they become frustrated with lack of progress. In the meantime, attacks on vital civilian infrastructure, including the health system, are likely a chosen Russian strategy to weaken the civilian population - a tactic which was used widely by the Russians in Syria, Grozny and Chechnya and which they will continue to use elsewhere.
- Russia will achieve a significant tactical advantage if it is able to capture Kramatorsk. This would allow Russian troops to limit the supply lines to the Ukrainian army in the east, and increase the pressure on Mariupol. However, the Ukrainian army will be able to re-supply and support from the north, including through Dnipro, if they have sufficient aid defence, and anti-tank weapons, such as Stinger, Javelin and New generation Light Anti-Tank Weapon (NLAW), which only Western countries can supply.

Diplomatic / Economic

- Further Russian war crimes are likely to be uncovered as Ukrainian forces move further into northern Ukraine. However, despite President Biden's description of President Putin as a "butcher" and "war criminal" he is highly unlikely to be indicted. Russia – as a permanent member of the UNSC - can veto any such motion. Secondly, China is still very much promoting support to Russia with "**no limits**" – for now – so it is unlikely to back any further action against Moscow. That being said, China still continues to express concern over the conflict, and its government appears wary of fully backing Russia's campaign calling on both sides for a ceasefire and talks (China's current exports to the EU and US alone total around 50 per cent of its GDP, against just three per cent for Russia). This, and Russia's non-membership of the International Criminal Court, means that efforts to bring any of the senior members of the Russian military, or government, let alone Putin, to the ICC, are highly likely to fail because only the UN Security Council could ask the ICC to investigate a war of aggression, which Russian can veto. Attempts to reform the UN Security Council through an additional code of conduct related to the use of the veto - that would require five permanent members of the Security Council to voluntarily commit to refraining from using the veto where a mass atrocity has been ascertained -has so far failed.

- Future war crime prosecutions of individual soldiers are likely. For a war crime prosecution, it is easier to pin a war crime on the soldier who committed it, than the leader who ordered it. Understanding the chain of command is important in any trial to prove that a leader authorised or turned a blind eye to atrocities. Ukrainian authorities have already issued arrest warrants for individuals accused of atrocities, though the actual trial may not be carried out immediately as they will not want to highlight any war crimes that may have been reported as this would provide strong propaganda opportunities for Russia
- Although reports continue about supposed Ukrainian and Russian biological weapons, they are highly unlikely to be used, mainly due to lack of facilities and scientific equipment required to support such a move. The use of a supposedly “accidental” incident using chemical weapons continues to rise. This will increase further if efforts by Russian ground forces stall once again in the East. We have heard from local sources within the INGO community that they are currently mapping ammonia plants and fertiliser factories near to their locations over concerns of such an incident. If Mariupol continues to hold, an “accidental” strike against an ammonia or similar explosive chemical plant may occur – leaving both sides to blame the other. This also could occur against cities such as Kharkiv, though only if Russia re-focuses on the city and - for now - this is unlikely as it lacks sufficient forces in the area. It is also unlikely for now that President Putin would look to use a nuclear strike, though any such resumption of shelling of Chernobyl (back in Ukrainian hands since 01 April) could see widespread radioactive contamination with apprehension already raised over Russian moves around the area. The Director for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has tweeted that he will lead a mission to Chernobyl, having already released a statement over such concerns.



Mitigation

- Continue to remain outside of the current frontlines – where possible. PPE and medical equipment should be kept with all staff members at all times.
- Do **NOT** attempt to self-medicate for Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear (CBRN) materials or use CBRN equipment. The use of Medical Iodine should only be used under medical supervision, and CBRN equipment requires at least two weeks to a month’s training. Stay away from areas where CBRN may have been used, and if affected by CW – immediately wash off the chemical and **SEEK DIRECT MEDICAL HELP**.
- Ensure rations of at least two weeks to a month’s supply is kept at field base, and a 48-hour ration pack kept for those nearing front lines (though see first point above). Ensure constant supply of bottled water where possible.
- Ensure that all staff members have access to mental health counselling – especially if dealing with possible war crimes, or processing refugees who have had exposure to war crimes.

Operational Impact

- **Chernobyl:** be aware that media reports have suggested the area has been hit by shells and defensive earthworks and the movements of armoured vehicles have disturbed contaminated ground. The area is still radioactive enough to render large parts of Europe unliveable. The main risk is thyroid cancer from the radioactive fallout, as the thyroid is affected by iodine absorbing it in large quantities. Iodine medication may be given – but only under medical supervision.
- **European borders:** as the volume of refugees increases – consider working at other smaller border crossings, especially outside of Poland.

Appendix

Air superiority

- Russia's air force was around 13 times the size of the Ukrainian air force however so far has not achieved air superiority. This is in part due to the number of air defences – S-300s, Javelin, Stingers and Starstreaks (though these are limited in number) that Ukraine has been able to use.
- In addition, Russian pilots were only able to practice flying for around 100 hours per year (or 20 minutes per day). They also only practice in dry weather, and in groups of one or two unlike NATO which practises in all weather and in larger formations.
- A local source has noted that what is left of the Ukrainian Air Force is operating in the South/ West of the country, but cannot challenge the Russians in the east - where they do have air superiority. The Russians are concerned over anti-aircraft defences such as MANPADs, however these are only effective by day to 12,000 ft. The pro-Russian militia also have SAM (Surface to Air Missile) systems, which will also stall Ukrainian aircraft in the east.

Naval power

- Beach landing and artillery fire: Beach landings are extremely hard to achieve and require much training. The BBC reported on [24 March](#) that a Russian tank landing ship had been destroyed by a missile in Berdyansk. The ship carried over 50 per cent of Russia's ability to land tanks via beaches – and has in effect destroyed the port and access to the port. Therefore for now, it is highly unlikely that a beach landing operation will be carried out.

White Phosphorus

- Geneva convention: Under international law, white phosphorus is considered an incendiary weapon, defined by Protocol III of the Convention on the Prohibition of Use of Certain Conventional Weapons as “any weapon or munition which is primarily designed to set fire to objects or to cause burn injury to persons through the action of flame, heat or combination thereof, produced by a chemical reaction of a substance delivered on the target.”
- The protocol prohibits using incendiary weapons against military targets located among civilians, although the United States has not signed it and is not bound by it. According to Human Rights Watch, “customary laws of war also prohibit the anti-personnel use of incendiary weapons so long as weapons less likely to cause unnecessary suffering are available.”
- It may however be used as a legitimate smokescreen to hide advancing troops and equipment when moving across the battlefield, so long as it is not near to civilians or civilian infrastructure.

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