



1-28 FEBRUARY NEWSLETTER

MAIN TAKEAWAY OF THE MONTH

Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine only days after recognizing the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics. Ukraine has been under intense assault since February 24th, with hundreds of thousands of people leaving the nation and the government forced to order a general mobilization and organize the armed resistance of forces. Despite the start of preliminary talks between the two parties, Russian forces have continued their heavy strikes. In a more concerning move, Putin has placed his nuclear deterrent troops on "special alert." Meanwhile, the West has slapped severe and unprecedented sanctions on Russia, specifically targeting its banking, trade, and aviation sectors. For the first time in its history, the EU has agreed to provide military aid and weapons, while Germany will increase defense expenditure to more than 2% of its GDP. Major corporations are also ceasing business with Russia. The Western Balkans' reaction has been mixed, with some supporting Western sanctions and others abstaining, while emphasizing the necessity of preserving nations' territorial integrity.

WAR IN UKRAINE



Shortly after recognizing the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states on February 21st, Russian President Vladimir Putin [ordered troops](#) on the territories to "maintain peace". This development sparked unease, stoking fears that a Russian invasion might take place soon. On the morning of February 24th, in a televised address, President Putin announced that Russian forces will undertake a "[special military operation](#)", aimed at "denazifying" Ukraine, and immediately launched a large-scale invasion of the country, attacking from the North, East and South. Upon the outbreak of the invasion, Ukraine has imposed a [general mobilization](#) of the population.

On the first day of the invasion, Russian forces attacked and [occupied Snake Island](#), located off the Southern coast of Ukraine, and only 41km away from the coastal city of Sulina, Romania. The increased proximity to Romania's exclusive economic zone raises concerns, and it is very possible that Russia will disregard the [official delineation](#) of the territorial limit of the

continental shelf made by the International Court of Justice in 2009. Russian troops also seized the [former Chernobyl](#) nuclear power plant, but [assurances](#) have been given that the radiation level around the plant is within its limits. Towns around the [Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant](#) had also been seized, but the plant's operations continued as normal.

The Russian Army advanced on Kyiv from the first day, seizing control of the [Hostomel airbase](#) on the outskirts of the capital. However, their advancement was stopped in the suburbs of Kyiv. The [capital](#) has been under [heavy assault](#), while a [vast military convoy](#) stretching back 65km has amassed on the outskirts of the city. In Donbass, Russian troops have continued their heavy shelling on the port city of [Mariupol](#). Taking control of Mariupol creates a terrestrial corridor for Russia to Crimea. The port city of [Kherson](#) was overtaken by Russian forces on March 3rd, while Kharkov is under [heavy shelling](#). From the South, Russian forces entered from Crimea. The troops have also [destroyed a dam](#) built in Ukraine's Kherson region in 2014 to cut off water to Crimea, thus solving the water supply issue. Russian attacks have been repeatedly described as brutal, due to the reported high number of Ukrainian [civilian casualties](#). Despite the fact that the two parties have already had a [first round of talks](#), and another is on the way, Russian troops have maintained their heavy attacks on Ukraine.

In the face of rising tensions, Vladimir Putin ordered the Russian military to put its [nuclear deterrence forces on "special alert"](#). While this does not mean Russia intends to use nuclear weapons, the international community saw it as a clear threat.

On March 3rd, [Ukrainian sources](#) claimed that the Russian Armed Forces had suffered about 9.000 casualties, dead and wounded. The United Nations have also announced that [a million](#) people had fled Ukraine since the start of the invasion, and according to [estimates](#) around 4 million could leave in the coming weeks and months.

WESTERN RESPONSE



So far, the Western reaction has been rapid and coordinated. A few days after Russia invaded Ukraine, the EU and the US barred several Russian banks from using the [global SWIFT](#) payments system – the bank messaging system that underpins global trade. The EU has also committed to imposing a series of “restrictive measures” that would prevent the Central Bank from deploying its international reserves. According to EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, such measures would [paralyze Russia's central bank](#) assets and freeze its transactions. The country is already seeing the [effects of these sanctions](#), as the ruble hit record lows, sliding as much as 30% against the dollar, while the Russian central bank doubled interest rates to 20%. In an attempt to curb Russian propaganda and disinformation, the EU has [suspended](#) broadcasting activities of Sputnik and Russia Today across the Union.

Around 30 countries, including the EU, UK, and US, have [closed their airspace](#) to Russian flights. Western governments are also considering bans on maritime traffic, after the UK became the first to announce this measure.

[Several companies](#) and brands have also announced that they would shut down services, pull out of, or restrict their services in Russia. Such companies include car manufacturers like Ford, Mercedes-Benz and BMW, retailers, tech companies like Apple and Google, and social media websites such as Facebook, which has restricted access to Russian state media outlets such as RT and Sputnik. [Major energy companies](#), such as BP - Russia's largest foreign investor - and Shell and Exxon Mobil, have announced they would end their joint ventures with Russian energy companies. Germany also halted [certification](#) of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

In a major defence policy shift, Germany which has announced [it will boost its defense funds](#) up to more than 2% of its GDP. Even more surprising is Berlin's decision to [send weapons to Ukraine](#), overturning a longstanding practice of blocking lethal weapons from being sent to conflict zones

Both the EU and individual Member States have also stepped up [humanitarian aid for Ukraine](#), especially for the huge influx of refugees trying to leave the country. Individual states have also pledged to send weapons and equipment to Ukraine. Responding to Ukraine's requests, the EU has authorized on February 27th to finance the supply of lethal and non-lethal materials to the Ukrainian army, [worth €500 million](#).

Due to its support of the Russian military aggression, Belarus has also been hit by [sanctions from the EU](#), which include restrictions in the trade of goods, and exports of dual-use goods, among others.

REACTIONS FROM THE BALKANS



Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, [accused Albania, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina \(BiH\) and Kosovo](#) of allegedly sending mercenaries to fight in Ukraine. In response, Russia's hostile actions were criticized and the claims denied. Albania and Kosovo also signaled their support for Ukraine. At the same time, [concerns in Kosovo](#) are more geographical in nature, as a result of its closeness to the ongoing conflict with pro-Russian Serbia. Since Belgrade does not recognize Kosovo as an independent nation, there are fears that the conflict in Ukraine may enable Serbia to advance into the northern portions of the country populated mostly by ethnic Serbs. While officials in North Macedonia had [announced](#) they were ready to receive Ukrainian refugees even before the incident, there are [concerns](#) about the opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, which has shifted towards a more pro-Russian, pro-Serbian and anti-Western stance. The difficult situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is the consequence of the Serbian political forces' silence while waiting for instructions from Belgrade. The other two factions support Ukraine and strongly condemn Russia's hostile actions. Meanwhile, Montenegro avoided making many pronouncements, but it has nonetheless urged Russia to resume negotiations. Pro-Moscow [publications in Serbia](#) praised Russia's actions, seeing them as a reaction to NATO threats.

In terms of sanctions, as fears of instability intensified, both Albania and North Macedonia opted to [restrict their airspace to Russian planes](#), while Albania also voted for a set of [sanctions](#) which include freezing of assets. Moreover, North Macedonia will also deploy military equipment and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Kosovo has likewise [joined](#) international sanctions. While Serbia [opposes sanctions on Russia](#), it agrees to take in Ukrainian refugees and promises to send humanitarian and medical assistance. President Aleksandr Vučić also notes that Serbia "believes that violating the territorial integrity of any state, including Ukraine, is wrong". Meanwhile, Milorad Dodik, representative of the Serbian Party in BiH, notes that the [BiH would not accept the sanctions](#) imposed on Russia. Like Vučić, Dodik has also underlined that he supports the territorial integrity "of UN members, such as Ukraine".

- In Bulgaria, the former [Minister of Defense Stefan Yanev was dismissed](#) from his position, after his refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He was replaced by [Dragomir Zakov](#), Bulgaria's Representative to NATO.
- President Klaus Iohannis announced that Romania would [increase its share of GDP](#) allocated to defense from 2% to 2.5%. The head of state also announced that Romania's energy independence was needed, mainly through the development of civilian renewable and nuclear energy, and that Romania would become a center to allow the collection and transportation of international donations in humanitarian aid to Ukraine.
- Russia's aggression in Ukraine has changed [Finland's perception](#) of the North Atlantic Alliance. A study by the Finnish broadcaster Yle found that 53% of Finns support the country's NATO membership. These figures mark a drastic change in public attitudes. The previous survey in 2017 showed that only 19% of Finns supported accession.
- Poland will become a [logistical hub](#) for weapons supplies, while Romania will serve as distribution [hub for humanitarian aid](#) for Ukraine.



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