



1-31 MARCH NEWSLETTER

MAIN TAKEAWAY OF THE MONTH

Considering the Ukrainian resistance to Russian invasion, the war in Ukraine has become a protracted war, as most Russian advances appear to have been halted. Negotiations have been ongoing between the two sides, little substantial changes have taken place, with the Russian side promising to reduce its forces near Kyiv, while airstrikes still continue. Meanwhile, Western nations look to coordinate their efforts and impose further sanctions on Moscow while finding ways to reduce their reliance on Russian gas. At its turn, Russia has asked that its clients pay in rubles for energy – something that countries such as Germany and France have rejected. At the same time, tensions remain high in the Balkans, with elections being scheduled for April 3rd in Serbia and for May 24th in Albania, as well as a deadlock in Bosnia and Herzegovina over Russian-EU alignment in what regards its strategy and even its future as a country.

WAR IN UKRAINE



The last month saw Russian forces fighting on multiple fronts: in an attempt to seize the entire Black Sea coast of Ukraine in order to isolate the country, the Russian forces have advanced from Kherson towards Mykolaiv and have attempted to encircle the city. On March 4, heavy fighting took place around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear facility that set off a fire, raising worldwide alarm. Although the fire has been put out, and the radiation levels have remained stable, the plant remained in Russian hands. Advances towards Kiev have been made from three directions, east of the Dnieper, from Chernihiv, Sumy (both bypassed) and Konotop (occupied by the Russians last month). Russian forces in the east have made slow advances in Donbas, while also launching violent attacks towards Izyum and Severodonetsk, both remaining under Ukrainian control. Overall, the only important cities captured by the Russian Armed Forces remain Kherson and Melitopol, in southern Ukraine, as Kharkiv, Mariupol and Kyiv remain in Ukrainian hands after more than a month of siege.

In late March, the Ukrainian Armed Forces organized several limited counterattacks: on March 28th, the district of Irpin, north-west of Kiev was recovered by Ukrainian forces. Russian troops have been pushed away from Mykolaiv as well, while in the north-east, several towns around Kharkiv have been recaptured by Ukraine. Overall, the Russian offensive has been stalled on most fronts, and its logistical ability to conduct further offensives, while maintaining control over the already-seized territory, is under question.

The number of people [fleeing Ukraine](#) has reached almost 4 million, by the end of March. Out of these, 2.3 million fled the war through Poland, and around 600.000 through Romania (including those crossing the Romania - Moldova border). Although the two warring sides settled on [12 humanitarian corridors](#) last week, enabling civilians to flee the war and allowing the transportation of humanitarian aid, Ukraine has [recently stated](#) that it no longer plans to open new such corridors, due to possible Russian "provocations" along the routes.

Negotiations have been underway between the two countries, with the most recent being hosted by Turkey, and taking place in Istanbul. While Russia had promised it would significantly reduce military action in the direction of Kyiv and Chernihiv following the negotiations, airstrikes [have continued](#), and, according to reports, the Russian forces are actually regrouping. The next day, on March 30th, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov also [downplayed](#) any hope of a possible truce.

RUSSIA... IN OTHER NEWS



On March 2nd, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that demands [Russia to immediately withdraw](#) its troops from Ukraine. Out of 193 UN member states, only 5 countries voted against, namely Russia, Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea, and Syria. More international reactions to Russia's invasion are on the way, with the [New Development Bank](#) (NDB), established within the BRICS group, deciding to halt all the new transactions in Russia. The European Commission declared that the [EU will not participate in further cooperation](#) projects with Russian entities. Brussels also submitted proposals to reduce the EU's reliance on Russian gas by two thirds by the end of 2022, as a part of the programme aimed at making the [EU independent of all Russian fossil fuels](#) by 2030. In order to further undermine Moscow's economy, the US [imposed sanctions against Russian oligarchs](#). A few days later, [President Joe Biden](#) announced an immediate ban on Russian oil and other energy imports into the US. As a reaction to the pan-European human rights body decision to suspend Moscow's rights of representation, Russia announced that it [will no longer be a member](#) of the Council of Europe. As part of an Informal Meeting of the Heads of State or Government in Brussels, EU leaders agreed to increase [investment in member states' defense capabilities](#) and take more steps towards consolidating European sovereignty. Throughout this month, protests have been taking place around Europe, either against the war, or pro-Kremlin demonstrations. At the beginning of March, thousands of [Serbs marched in support of the Russian Federation](#). A few days later, [the second pro-Kremlin demonstration](#) took place in Belgrade. In Cyprus, a group of Russians, along with other Cypriots, have participated in a [Pro-Kremlin, anti-NATO demonstration](#), which denounced „Ukrainian crimes in Donbass”. In Spain, more than 5.000 people gathered into a [“no-fly zone over Ukraine” demonstration](#). In Germany, tens of thousands of [people marched protesting against the Russian invasion](#) in Ukraine. Protests have also been taking place [in Russia](#), denouncing the war and opposing the Kremlin's attempts to undermine free press and speech. According to the independent monitor [OVD-Info](#), by April 1st, 15.110 detentions in relation to anti-war protests had taken place in Russia, since the beginning of the invasion in Ukraine.

Earlier this month, [Russia refused to appear in front of The International Court of Justice](#), the UN's highest court, for hearings on the invasion of Ukraine. Later on, The International Court of Justice in The Hague, demanded [Russia to stop its military operations in Ukraine](#) and that both sides in the war should refrain from further escalation. The [US assembled the Tiger Team](#), a group of national security officials to sketch out scenarios of how the United States and its allies should respond if Russia will engage with CBRN weapons.

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In the second part of the month, three key-meetings took place in Europe: the G7 meeting, the NATO extraordinary summit and the EU summit. As a part of the G7 meeting, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared that [there will be no further sanctions on Moscow](#), and that the group is focusing on implementing the existing ones. At the press conference after the NATO extraordinary summit, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared that the alliance will focus on [further imposing sanctions on Russia](#), along with strengthening the defense capabilities in the Eastern Flank. At the EU summit, the talks centered largely on strategies aimed at dealing with [Europe's dependency on Russian energy](#), where there was a clear division between those that were for and against intervening in the energy market.

Amid rising tensions regarding energy supplies and dependencies, Russia has announced that countries it deems as “unfriendly” countries [should pay for gas in rubles](#), or else supplies would be cut. This has been vehemently [opposed](#) by countries such as France and Germany, who have denounced this movement as going against agreed contracts and a form of “blackmail”.

Between Washington and Beijing, talks have taken place, culminating in a direct discussion between President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping. The US has [cautioned](#) China not to offer military support to Russia or assist it in evading sanctions, stating that if Beijing does so, it would face repercussions.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BALKANS



EU accession of the Western Balkan states is under question. As Serbia is preparing for its presidential, parliamentary and local elections on April 3rd, [a report](#) of the European Network of Election Monitoring Organisations (ENEMO) shows that pressure on voters, and the abuse of state resources are a cause for concern. In fact, it appears that Serbian authorities have been [removing ethnic Albanians](#) from the civil registry, stripping them of their right to vote, send their children to school, access healthcare, and essentially rendering them stateless. The election has also increased tensions with neighbors: President Vucic said he will impose [“restrictive measures”](#) on Montenegro and Kosovo, as they are [reportedly failing](#) to uphold the rights of ethnic Serbs to vote in the upcoming Serbian elections.

Tensions have sparked within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosnian-Croat entity of BiH. Attempts to [disempower the upper house](#) of the Federation’s parliament might limit the influence of the Croats, while also coming in violation of the Dayton Agreement, from the perspective of Dragan Čović, the leader of HDZ BiH party. Meanwhile, ministers from the Republika Srpska [vetoed a vote this week](#) on whether BiH would support EU sanctions on Russia. Ministers from the Federation, on the other hand, have been lobbying for the approval of EU sanctions. This impasse will allow Russia to continue to access European investment money to operate in the area, while tensions with the EU will likely inspire Dodik, who is running for re-election in October, to expand ties with Russia even more.

Meanwhile, [a new pro-Western government](#) will be installed in Montenegro, as the President has designated Dritan Abazović member of the United Reform Action party (URA) as Prime Minister of the future minority government. He is benefiting from the [unlikely support](#) of the Socialist People’s Party.

Meanwhile, Albania is also preparing for [presidential elections](#), which are due to be finalized by May 24th. According to officials, Parliament is preparing a calendar for the upcoming months, as the current president’s term is coming to an end.

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The uncertainty of EU accession is an important political theme for most Western Balkan nations. Despite the fact that EU chief diplomat Josep Borell did not [provide a clear date](#) for the start of North Macedonia's accession negotiations, France made it [clear](#) that it supports the start of EU negotiations for the country's accession, following a call between the countries' foreign ministers. BiH has also [demanded](#) that the EU expedite BiH's membership process, while Kosovo seeks to [join NATO](#) as soon as possible.

IN THE MEANTIME



- Belgrade [denies](#) Serbian 'militants' are fighting for Russia in Ukraine.
- In North Macedonia, the small parliamentary Left party was [condemned](#) because of aligning with Russian narratives about the invasion.
- Separatists in South Ossetia are considering holding [a referendum](#) to unite with Russia, which could further [amplify tensions](#) between the Kremlin and the West. South Ossetia leader Anatoly Bibinov announced that the breakaway republic would start legal proceedings to become part of Russia. The [process](#) will begin after the presidential elections, which are scheduled for the 10th of April, officials in South Ossetia said.
- The Russian-backed rebel region of Luhansk in eastern Ukraine has also announced that it may [organize a referendum](#) on joining Russia, prompting Kyiv to warn that such a move would be illegal and would provoke a greater international reaction.
- Concerns that potentially explosive mines [may be floating](#) across the Black Sea from Ukraine's beaches toward neighboring nations have prompted Turkey and Romania to rush in recent days to neutralize them.
- Following a police investigation, former Bulgarian Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov has been [detained](#) on March 17th, and [released](#) a day later. The EU corruption investigation against him continues.



New Strategy Center is a Romanian think tank, established in 2015, specialising in foreign affairs and security policy, a non-partisan, non-governmental organisation. New Strategy Center provides analytical inputs and expert advice to decision-makers, holds regular debates - both in-house and public - and publishes policy papers on subjects of topical interest. The Balkans and the Black Sea region are priority areas of interest for New Strategy Center.



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