



1-30 APRIL NEWSLETTER

MAIN TAKEAWAY OF THE MONTH

The withdrawal of Russian forces from northern Ukraine has uncovered evidence of crimes committed in places such as Bucha, causing an international outcry and a determined call for an investigation. Russia has regrouped and is now focusing its efforts in the eastern region of Donbas, attempting to surround Ukraine's forces and seize control of the strategic port city of Mariupol. Aside from the refugee issue, regional tensions are building as a result of a series of explosions in Transnistria, the breakaway region of the Republic of Moldova, which has sparked worries of a possible spillover of the conflict. Tensions in the energy sector have been exacerbated by Russia's decision to suspend gas deliveries to Bulgaria and Poland, a move that Europe has labeled as "blackmail" and has caused nations to seek alternative supply sources. The Balkans remain split in their approach to the Ukraine situation, with pro-Russia rallies erupting in Serbia after the government's decision to distance itself from Moscow. Meanwhile, the Balkan states' European future remains unclear, as Bulgaria continues to block North Macedonia's accession.

WAR IN UKRAINE



After promising to scale down military operations following the negotiations in Istanbul, the Russian army started retreating from the outskirts of Kyiv. Up until that point, the Russian offensive had failed to capture or, at least, encircle the city. Instead, Russia's new focus has been the Eastern region of Donbas, where its armed forces regrouped. Consequently, the Russian Federation began a [new offensive in Donbas](#), attempting to encircle the bulk of Ukrainian forces engaged on that front. In the besieged port city of Mariupol, Ukraine's major trading port, and a key city on the Russia-Crimea route, had all but been [encircled](#) by April 12th. Ukrainian forces continued to maintain control of the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol, repelling continuous assaults by Russian forces. As of April 27th, Russian forces were still trying to [clear](#) Mariupol of the last Ukrainian troops. Meanwhile, among Russia's setbacks, the sinking of the [Moskva](#) flagship is a significant success for Ukraine, was [armed](#) with multiple anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles, and was the only ship of its class in the Black Sea, which ultimately limits Russia's ability to operate in the area. Russia's retreat from the Kyiv area left behind [massacred](#) towns and villages. In the town of Bucha, satellite images reveal the crimes of Russian occupation in northern Ukraine, contradicting Russia's claims. The mayor of Bucha mentioned that [412 bodies](#) have been found

so far, in mass graves. As of now, [investigations](#) are undertaken by the Ukrainian authorities, aided by [French forensic experts](#) and a UN investigation is considered to be the next step, as [UN humanitarian chief](#) has answered Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba's call to visit Bucha. The international reaction came swiftly: [206 Russian diplomats](#) have been expelled in two days, after the massacres have been reported, and have triggered discussions among EU members on a [new wave of sanctions](#) on the Russian Federation.

This month, the United States' total pledged assistance has reached [more than \\$3.7 billion](#). In the most recent announcement, made on April 28th, President Joe Biden intends to ask Congress for \$33 billion to fund both [humanitarian and military aid](#) to Ukraine through September of this year. This follows the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv on the 25th, the highest-level visit by US officials to Ukraine since the crisis started and reaffirmed the US's full support in winning this conflict. Immediately after that meeting a series of talks were hosted at the German Ramstein Air Base on the 26th. The Air Base is where Washington pledged to conduct talks with allies within and beyond NATO on a nearly monthly basis in Germany to coordinate increasing Ukraine's defense capabilities as it faces Russia's aggression, bringing about a new era in Western assistance.

On April 27th, in the Odessa region, [two strikes](#) on the [strategic Zatoka bridge](#) across the Dniester estuary could [jeopardize](#) Ukraine's aspirations to enhance grain exports through its Danube ports. The bridge, which is traversed by a road and a railway, is part of the only fully Ukrainian-controlled rail connection to the Danube ports and is seen as a possible path for grain exports by Kyiv authorities if Ukraine's Black Sea ports are closed. Furthermore, railway traffic from Izmail to Odessa is no longer possible, and the only method to go from Odessa to Izmail and Reni is by road through the Republic of Moldova's Palanca region.

REGIONAL IMPACT



The region is feeling the effects of the refugee crisis, with Poland taking in the highest number of refugees - around 2,9 million, [as of April 27th](#), and the Republic of Moldova, despite being one of Europe's poorest countries, taking in more Ukrainian refugees per capita than any other nation (439,290). In an effort to assist the authorities in Chişinău in dealing with this issue, Romania, Germany, and France established the [Moldova Support Platform](#) (MSP), through which donors [pledged €659.5 million](#). A [second ministerial](#) conference for the MSP is scheduled to take place in Bucharest. Meanwhile, Poland has also requested [additional financial assistance](#) from the EU to help fund efforts to cope with the influx of refugees.

A [series of explosions](#) reported on April 25th-26th at three military objectives in Transnistria, the breakaway region of the Republic of Moldova, bordering Ukraine, has ramped up fears that the war could spill over into neighbouring countries. The explosions occurred only days after a Russian commander [stated](#) that the invasion of Ukraine was part of an attempt to stop persecution of Russian-speaking people in Transnistria. It is unknown who is responsible for these strikes, although local officials blamed Ukraine, while Russia accused Ukraine of staging a false flag operation. Following a [meeting of the Security Council](#) of the Republic of Moldova, President Maia Sandu said it was „an attempt to escalate the situation” and blamed „internal differences between various groups in Transnistria that have an interest in destabilising the situation”. She [recommended](#) increased patrols and vehicle inspections near a buffer zone with Transnistria, as well as tougher public safety measures, and security checks on critical infrastructure. President Sandu also [announced](#) that an OSCE delegation is expected to visit the R. of Moldova by the end of April, in light of the tense situation in the

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Transnistrian region. Meanwhile, Tiraspol's self-proclaimed government has declared a [red-level terrorism threat](#), which is in effect for 15 days beginning April 26th.

The Ukraine conflict has also had a significant impact on the energy sector, with the latest tensions culminating in the Russian energy giant Gazprom [suspending gas deliveries](#) to Bulgaria and Poland due to failure to meet the Kremlin's demands for payment in rubles. Andrzej Duda, the President of Poland, said that "necessary legal actions" would be taken against Gazprom, while Bulgaria, which relies on Russia for more than 90% of its gas supply, is taking steps to find [alternative sources](#). While the European Commission has decried this decision as [blackmail](#) on Russia's part, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has also emphasized that the bloc was "prepared for this scenario", and that the EU, along with its international partners, will implement an "immediate, united, and coordinated" response.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BALKANS



Russia's aggression against Ukraine has sparked a range of responses among Balkan nations, further aggravating the region's already volatile geopolitical situation. In Serbia, [pro-Russian protesters](#) have demonstrated against the government's decision to distance itself from Moscow, by voting in favor of UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and suspending it from UNHRC. At the same time, considering the latest news on new governmental/diplomatic appointments, we could also notice a pro-Atlantic/pro-American approach of Belgrade, which is yet to be confirmed and which we will continue monitoring. In addition to that, Serbia stated its intention of purchasing 12 Rafale [jets from France](#), despite Moscow being one of its traditional military suppliers. Meanwhile, Montenegro has decided to [ban broadcasts](#) by Russian Today and Sputnik, in spite of internal divisions on the matter. [Elections in Serbia](#) have resulted in President Vucic's unsurprising victory, by winning 59.5% of the votes. His party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), has also achieved 43.4% of the votes in the parliamentary election, losing its parliamentary majority. Meanwhile, Montenegro's designated Prime Minister, Dritan Abazovic, has announced Podgorica's intention of holding [early elections in 2023](#).

The EU accession process of the Western Balkan states is still under question. Bulgaria has announced that it will continue to [block the accession of North Macedonia](#) within the European Union, until it receives "constitutional guarantees for the rights of Bulgarians in the Republic of North Macedonia", as stated by Foreign Minister Teodora Genchovska. Consequently, Albania, whose accession process has been tied to that of North Macedonia, is attempting to [separate its course](#) from that of Skopje. As Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has stated, "Albania cannot wait anymore until two neighbors resolve their quarrel". The United States is concerned about instability in the Balkans, and has [sanctioned](#) seven individuals active in Balkan politics, media, and justice, whom the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control has labeled as a "severe danger to regional stability" (OFAC). These individuals, who are nationals of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, now have their assets frozen, and Americans are generally barred from dealing with them.

- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has lowered its forecasts for global growth due to the war in Ukraine, warning that Russia's invasion could lead to the [fragmentation](#) of the world economy into rival blocs.
- Both [Ukraine](#) and the [Republic of Moldova](#) have received and completed the European Commission's questionnaire on the application for EU membership.
- Viktor Orbán, the incumbent Prime Minister, has been [re-elected](#) for a fourth consecutive term - his fifth overall - after a dominant performance by his nationalist Fidesz party in the elections.



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