

2B BRIEF

Black Sea & Balkans

SEPTEMBER

1-30 SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER

MAIN TAKEAWAY OF THE MONTH

In the midst of a tumultuous month, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared a controversial partial military mobilization, prompting protests and attempts by Russians to flee the country. The Kremlin has formally announced the annexation of Kherson, Luhansk, Donesk, and Zaporizhzhia, following so-called referendums in Ukraine's occupied territories. In response to this move, Ukraine has declared its formal application to the NATO Alliance on September 30th. Meanwhile, four leaks on the Nord Stream pipelines have been identified in the Baltic Sea, causing international outrage and accusations of sabotage, fueling fears of infrastructure attacks and a new stage of a hybrid war just ahead of the winter season. Bosnia & Herzegovina and Bulgaria both headed for elections on October 2nd, while Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro have all been faced with an increased risk of cyberattacks.

WAR IN UKRAINE



The month of September was defined by the so-called referendums in Ukraine's occupied territories: Kherson, Luhansk, Donesk, and Zaporizhzhia. According to the [results](#), 87% of Kherson residents approved of the Russian Federation's annexation, while 98.4% approved in Luhansk, 99.2% in Donesk, and 93.1% in Zaporizhzhia. Both Ukraine and Western leaders have [slammed](#) the referendum, with Kyiv [declaring the results](#) to be „null and worthless”, and calling on the West to continue to increase military aid to the country. Meanwhile, on September 30th, Russian President Vladimir Putin [has signed](#) the formally annexing the seized Ukrainian regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia to Russia. As a response to the annexation, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on the same day that Ukraine is [formally applying](#) for fast-track membership to NATO.

On the front, the Ukrainian Army has gained territory in other regions, recovering over [8000 square kilometers in half a month](#), primarily in the Kharkiv area, building on the gains made in August, primarily through advances in the Kherson region and targeting Russian logistics. Around the 6th of September, Ukraine launched one of its most significant counter-offenses since the start of the war, in the Kharkiv region, which [forced Russian troops to retreat](#). The victories were so substantial from Ukraine's side, that even the Russian propaganda machine had to [acknowledge the defeats](#), for the first time since the start of the war. By far the biggest defeat suffered by Russia throughout this war has been [the loss of the city of Izyum, in the Kharkiv Oblast](#). Ukraine has also managed to recover [regions from Donbas](#) as well. It is hardly surprising that the Russian army's recurrent losses have resulted in a restructure and dismissal of military officials. While this has been frequent throughout the war, current

sources indicate that Vladimir Putin is quite dissatisfied with Russia's losses in the last month. As a result, it is alleged that Putin has begun to [involve himself more in combat decision-making](#), causing tensions with his commanders. This has happened in Kherson, where Ukraine has begun to advance. While Russian generals advised retreat, Putin appears to have ignored that request. To achieve this victory, Ukraine made use of [disinformation campaigns](#) launched in the media, to confuse the Russian forces on the actual trajectory of the offensive.

The liberation of cities and villages by Ukrainian soldiers has also brought to light the crimes committed by Russian occupation troops. As a result, in some of the liberated villages [in the Kharkiv area, improvised torture chambers](#) were found, holding tens of prisoners. By far the most heinous atrocity that was discovered was in Izyum, where a [mass grave was containing around 400 bodies was discovered](#). In response to these allegations, [the United Nations dispatched a mission](#) to investigate the burial site as soon as possible. Some of the [preliminary findings](#) indicate that Russia perpetrated war crimes in Izyum. Steps are being taken to increase Russia's accountability at an international level. The American ambassador to the United Nations is [pushing for a reform of the Security Council](#), on the issue of the permanent members' right to veto, as Russia is also a permanent member.

When it comes to foreign aid for Ukraine, during his visit in Ukraine, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has announced an aid of [\\$2.8 billion to Ukraine and other countries on the Eastern front threatened by Russia](#). On September 28th, the Department of Defense (DoD) also announced approximately \$1.1 billion in [additional security assistance](#) for Ukraine under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). In total, the US has now committed more than \$16.9 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since January 2021. The only sign of reluctance from the US regarding aid seems to be the [delivery of long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems \(ATACMS\) missiles](#), as there are fears of an escalation of the war, with Ukraine possibly hitting Russian territory.

DEVELOPMENTS IN RUSSIA



On September 21st, Vladimir Putin announced a [partial mobilization of military reservists](#), the order having immediate effect. The declared purpose was of mobilizing up to 300.000 reservists. The legal document contains a classified paragraph, raising fears that the number will actually be much higher, possibly reaching 1 million in the following year. The announcement even garnered [criticism](#) from the Kremlin's own official supporters.

So far, the conscription process has been shrouded in failure, with [underaged males, old people and people with disabilities being drafted](#). There have also been accusations of [ethnic cleansing](#), with entire settlements in Russia's Dagestan province being summoned to military commissariats. The disarranged partial mobilisation [was acknowledged](#) by President Vladimir Putin, but avoided assigning blame for these failures, either to the ministry or the regional officials, while promising to stop and correct the abuses committed in the first week.

Protests [erupted](#) in many rural and urban Russian settlements with scores of arrests. Some arrested men were handed draft notices while being detained in police stations. Protests occurred throughout the country, with the largest ones taking place in Russia's Dagestan region, which has disproportionately been affected by the partial mobilisation ordered by Vladimir Putin. According to data from the Institute for the Study of War, in the [five days](#) after the announcement, 100 protests had been recorded, with 14 attacks on military recruitment centres and 2 attacks against other administrative buildings across the countries. Large demonstrations also took place in big cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. [Data provided by the OVD-Info](#), a Russian human-rights group, 2413 people have been detained so far in anti-war potests.

Additionally, more than 200.000 Russian citizens, predominantly males of conscription age, [fled to Russia's land borders](#) trying to avoid being forcibly drafted. On Russia's Southern border, neighbours Kazakhstan and Georgia [have been welcoming](#) Russians fleeing conscription. More than 100.000 Russian citizens [crossed the border into Kazakhstan](#), whilst around [60.000 entered Georgia](#).

[The Baltic states](#), [Poland](#) and most recently [Finland](#) have all closed their borders to Russian citizens, with exceptions allowed for visiting relatives of studying. On the other hand, Germany [signalled its willingness](#) to take in Russians fleeing their country.

The sanctions imposed by the West have also affected Russia's capability of acquiring weapons. As a result, Russia has been forced to get [artillery projectiles from North Korea and drones from Iran](#). While this equipment is not as advanced as the Western weapons that Ukraine uses, Ukrainian officials have admitted that especially the [Iranian drones have produced significant damage](#) to their armies.

THE CURRENT ENERGY LANDSCAPE



On Monday, the 25th of September, explosions in the Baltic Sea have been detected, which severely affected the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines. Swedish seismologists reported detecting the underwater explosions on Monday. [Three separate leaks](#) erupted from the Nord Stream pipelines, which were already caught up in the conflict over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sending swirling streams of methane to the surface of waters off Denmark and Sweden.

[There are](#) fears that large volumes of salt water will flow into the pipelines and cause corrosion, rendering the pipelines unusable on the long term. The European Union accused an [act of sabotage](#), pointing to possible Russian involvement. The Kremlin [was quick to dismiss](#) these and shift the blame on the West. On the 29th of September, European Union energy commissioner Kadri Simson [called for the bloc](#) to cap the price of Russian gas exports to Europe.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of the month, [Open Balkan leaders called for EU support](#) in trying to deal with looming energy crisis. Serbian President Aleksander Vucic has emphasized that the region is working together on finding the best way to mitigate a potential fallout of the crisis. During the same meeting, Albania, Serbia [signed a memorandum](#) to cooperate in the energy and mining sectors. The memorandum envisions mutual assistance for investments in new capacities, particularly the construction of an LNG terminal in Albania, as well as the development of renewable energy capacities, as well as mutual linkages in these domains. The agreement also envisions the interchange of scientific and technological research in the field of green energy, as well as the establishment of stronger business and economic links in the energy sector, including the utilization of transportation, transmission, and storage capacities.

Eastwards, Georgia and Romania are [planning a power interconnection](#) under the Black Sea. Georgia is conducting a feasibility study for an undersea electricity link with Romania, worth €2 billion. Azerbaijan also intends to use the interconnection to export green electricity, and Hungary said it would join the project. In an announcement meant to ease fears around energy shortages in Europe, the Romanian Energy Ministry [expects Black Sea gas](#) investment decision by the end of 2022. On October 1st, Romanian PM Nicolae Ciucă together with EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen and officials from Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Azerbaijan, Greece, and Serbia, [inaugurated the operationalization of the Greece-Bulgaria gas interconnector](#), a project that PM Ciucă described as „essential for the security of Europe, of our region and of strategic importance to Romania”.

In Western Europe, Germany [is to nationalise](#) gas giant Uniper in an effort to secure energy supplies amid the war in Ukraine. The deal will see the German government take on a 98.5% stake in the firm at a cost of €8.5bn.

Russia's war in Ukraine has been a major contributor to the surge in geopolitical risk. Energy infrastructure and shipping has been disrupted in the war zone with pipelines, power plants and refineries targeted. [News reports by S&P Global Commodity Insights](#) show there have been 46 security incidents and attacks on energy and commodities infrastructure in the conflict zone since the war began.

SITUATION IN THE BALKANS



While [Bulgaria](#) and [Bosnia & Herzegovina](#) headed for elections on October 2nd, Montenegro has been faced with a political crisis leading to early elections. Meanwhile, the governments of Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro are faced with the threat of severe cyberattacks.

According to [preliminary results in BiH](#),¹ for the Bosniak seat of the Presidency, the United Opposition pro-Western candidate Denis Becirovic appears to have won over Alija Izetbegovic with 57% to 37,8%. The incumbent Croat member of the Presidency, Zeljko Komsic, is most likely to win, obtaining 53.6% of the votes against HDZ candidate Borjana Kristo, who gathered 46.4% of the votes. SNSD candidate Željka Cvijanovic is most likely to obtain the Serb seat with 52.9% of the votes. In Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik is shown in the lead of the Presidential race, with 48.8%, followed by the PDP candidate, Jelena Trivic, with 42.7%. Following the elections, the Office of the High Representative of BiH used its extensive powers to impose a second set of reforms for the [electoral law](#). This agreement prolonged the deadline for creating a government following the election and ensured the smooth operation of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, BiH's Bosniak-Croat entity. The [Preliminary results in Bulgaria](#) point towards a victory of former PM Boyko Borisov's GERB party, obtaining as much as 23.5% of the votes. Meanwhile, We Continue the Change, the former ruling party, only gathered 19.5% of the votes. Other parties with significant results were: Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) with 15.2%, Revival (10%), Coalition for Bulgaria (BSP) with 8.9% and Democratic Bulgaria, with 7%.

As Bulgarian citizens head to the polls for an early Parliamentary election, the police in Bulgaria made [arrests](#) to combat the potential of voting fraud, after evidence of scamming and vote selling was discovered in several northern towns. Bulgaria is not the only country to face early elections, as on September 20th, Montenegro's President, Milo Djukanovic, proposed a [snap election](#), after the parliamentary parties [failed](#) to establish a new government in the aftermath of the collapse of Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic's minority government.

¹ In September, New Strategy Center has published two articles on the elections in both [Bulgaria](#) and [Bosnia & Herzegovina](#), assessing the main candidates, potential coalitions, and providing an in-depth look at BiH's complex electoral system.

The same outgoing PM has declared that the Special State Prosecution has started an investigation against [foreign espionage](#), detaining six Russian diplomats, 30 Russians with temporary residence permits and two Montenegrins, suspecting them of cooperation with Russian intelligence. Meanwhile, the Montenegrin government will continue to [function offline](#), after its institutions have been targeted by cyberattacks since August 24th, and neighboring countries are also dealing with such attacks. Albania has been facing a second series of cyberattacks, after President Edi Rama has blamed Iran for similar attacks on the online services of the government in July. Consequently, Tirana has [severed ties](#) with Teheran, while Iran has blamed the US for escalating tensions, as Washington backed Albania by [announcing sanctions](#) on Iran's intelligence ministry on September 9th. Kosovo has [also announced](#) that, on September 5th and 6th, its institutions have suffered from temporary disruptions of their networks, caused by attacks from outside Kosovo.

IN THE MEANTIME

- The opposition in the North Macedonian government is [blocking](#) the adoption of an agreement on the unrestricted movement of labor among the three members of the "Open Balkan" initiative.
- 88% of Romanians [believe](#) that NATO is "very" or "relatively" important for the country's security. 50% believe that the US will remain the most important global player in the next five years, and 65% believe that American influence is positive. As for the EU, 75% of Romanians believe that the Union has a positive influence in world politics.
- The European Union executive proposed on September 28th an [eighth round of sanctions against Russia](#) over its invasion of Ukraine, including tighter trade restrictions, more individual blacklistings and an oil price cap for third countries. Also, the proposed export bans [target semiconductors](#), aircraft and specific chemical substances crucial to Russia's armed forces. Following the annexation of four Ukrainian territories by Russia, the EU has promised to tighten its sanctions on Moscow.



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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