

Research Briefing

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Ukraine conflict: An overview

On 24 February 2022 Russia launched military action in Ukraine, with forces crossing into the country from Belarus in the north, Russia in the east and Crimea in the south.

The move came after months of diplomacy aimed at averting a crisis and despite Russian insistence that it had no plans to invade Ukraine. The Kremlin had previously said that its build-up of forces on Ukraine's borders was in response to provocative actions by NATO.¹

1

A special military operation

On 21 February 2022, President Putin officially recognised the self-declared independence of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), the regions of eastern Ukraine (the Donbas) that have been under the control of Russian-backed separatist forces since 2014.² Treaties of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance were subsequently signed with the leaders of those regions and Russian forces were deployed under the guise of peacekeeping operations.

Three days later, on 24 February, President Putin announced that Russia, acting in self-defence and in accordance with the Treaties of Friendship, was

¹ The build up to the invasion of Ukraine is examined in greater detail in House of Commons Library briefing, [Ukraine: Russia's "red line"](#), February 2022

² President of Russia, [Signing of documents recognising Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics](#), 21 February 2022

launching a special military operation in Ukraine. The purpose of the operation, he said, was to protect the people of the Donbas from “humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime” and to “demilitarise and de-nazify Ukraine”.³ The Kremlin denied, however, that it was planning to occupy Ukrainian territory or “to impose anything on anyone by force”.⁴

For the last year Russian forces have, however, been conducting a full-scale assault on the country.

After failing to take Kyiv in the first few months of the conflict, Russian forces have focused on southern and eastern Ukraine, with the aim of taking full control of the Donbas region and establishing, and sustaining, a land corridor through Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts, to Crimea in the south.

In the conduct of its military campaign [Russian soldiers have been widely accused of war crimes](#), allegations that [the Kremlin has also levelled at the Ukrainian government](#).

Since the end of February 2022, the UN Refugee Agency estimates that [millions of refugees have fled Ukraine](#).

2 Ukrainian counteroffensive – 2022

Over the course of 2022, Ukraine, with Western military assistance, has conducted a major counteroffensive. [Ukrainian forces have liberated significant territory](#) in the northeast and east of the country, including the towns of Izium, Kupiansk and Lyman. In the south, Ukrainian forces have retaken key towns and villages in Kherson, north of the Dnipro River.

In response, on 21 September [Russia declared a partial mobilisation of up to 300,000 reserve forces](#) and committed to defending the territorial integrity of Russia and the protection of people in the occupied regions in Ukraine.

3 Russian annexation of territory

At the end of September 2022, Russian-backed authorities in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia called urgent referendums on joining Russia, even though those regions were not totally under Russian control.

[According to the Kremlin](#) the four occupied regions voted overwhelmingly in support of accession to the Russian Federation. In a speech on 30

³ [Address by the President of the Russian Federation](#), 24 February 2022

⁴ [Address by the President of the Russian Federation](#), 24 February 2022

September, [President Putin announced Russia's intention to annex those regions](#) and recognise, and defend, them as part of the Russian Federation.

Those treaties of accession were signed into Russian law in early October 2022.⁵

Despite Russian attempts at annexation, all four regions are still not entirely under Russian control. Indeed, on 9 November Russia announced its intention to withdraw from the city of Kherson, the only regional capital it had captured since February 2022.⁶ The wider Kherson region, to the south of the Dnipro River, remains in Russian hands.

4 “Weaponising winter”

In late 2022, and with the onset of winter, Russian forces began increasingly targeting towns and cities and critical civilian national infrastructure across the whole country. Residential buildings, medical facilities and energy networks have been destroyed and millions of Ukrainians were left [without access to electricity, water and heat](#). Western leaders, including NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, accused President Putin of seeking to “weaponise winter”.⁷ EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, called the deliberate targeting of civilians and critical infrastructure a war crime.⁸

5 Widespread condemnation of Russia

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent conduct has been met with widespread condemnation.⁹ The annexation of Ukrainian territory has been called illegitimate and a violation of international law. Investigations into possible war crimes committed in Ukraine, including by [the International Criminal Court](#), are underway. In March 2023 the ICC issued an arrest warrant for President Putin for the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, which is a war crime under the Rome Statute.¹⁰

⁵ The impact of Russia's attempt to annex territory is examined in greater detail in House of Commons Library briefings, [Implications of the Russian-backed referendums in Ukraine](#), October 2022 and [The UN General Assembly condemns Russia: But what can it actually do?](#), October 2022

⁶ [“Kherson: Russia to withdraw troops from key Ukrainian city”](#), BBC News, 9 November 2022

⁷ NATO, [Interview with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg](#), 7 December 2022

⁸ EU External Action Service, [Press release](#), 6 January 2023

⁹ UN General Assembly, [Press release](#), 2 March 2022

¹⁰ International Criminal Court, [Press release](#), 17 March 2023

An “[unprecedented](#)” [package of sanctions](#) has been imposed on Russia by the US, EU, UK and other allies and partners around the world.¹¹

NATO has moved to shore up the defence of eastern Europe with the deployment of additional ships, fighter aircraft and troops to the region.¹² Military assistance is also being provided to Ukraine by NATO allies, although NATO troops will not be deployed on the ground as Ukraine is a partner country of the Alliance and not party to NATO’s Article V mutual defence clause. NATO allies have also ruled out imposing a no-fly zone over Ukraine. As a direct consequence of Russia’s actions in Ukraine, [Finland and Sweden have applied for NATO membership](#).¹³

Not all countries have been openly critical of Russia’s actions, however, with many opting to maintain a neutral stance. China, India, and many countries in Central Asia and Africa have abstained in votes in the UN General Assembly condemning Russian actions and calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops.¹⁴ They have also refused to implement [Western-led sanctions against Russia](#).

6 Prospects for the conflict

6.1 The long-awaited Ukrainian spring offensive

[Ukraine has vowed to continue its counteroffensive](#) and reclaim all its sovereign territory, including Crimea which Russia annexed in 2014.¹⁵ Russia has said [the annexed regions will be with Russia forever](#).¹⁶ With both sides continuing to call for a decisive victory, there appears little appetite for compromise or peace.¹⁷

Russian forces have continued in their efforts to gain full control of the Donbas, with fighting centred, for several months, around the city of

¹¹ Sanctions are examined in greater detail in House of Commons Library briefing, [Sanctions against Russia](#)

¹² NATO’s response is examined in House of Commons Library briefing, [NATO: Reinforcing its eastern flank](#), April 2022

¹³ Finland and Sweden’s applications to join NATO are examined in House of Commons Library, [NATO enlargement: Sweden and Finland](#), July 2022

¹⁴ There have been three votes in the UN General Assembly on the Ukraine conflict, in [March 2022](#), [October 2022](#) and [February 2023](#).

¹⁵ President of Ukraine, [Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#), 30 September 2022

¹⁶ President of Russia, [Signing on Treaties on Accession](#), 30 September 2022

¹⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Press release](#), 21 April 2023 and President of Ukraine, [Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#), 10 May 2023

Bakhmut. Russia has also been fortifying defences along its front lines in the south and east of the country.¹⁸

Western military assistance to Ukraine has been stepped up. The focus for allies has been on providing Ukraine, in the short window available, with the capability to both repel a Russian offensive, defend their sovereign territory, and to enable them to retake ground currently under Russian control.¹⁹

After months of speculation, limited Ukrainian offensives in the east of the country at the beginning of June 2023 appeared to signal the start of the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive.²⁰

6.2 Peace proposals

The outcome of the conflict appears far from certain. Nevertheless, international attention is increasingly being given to the conditions that may be required to bring about a peace settlement. Several countries have called for negotiations, and in February 2023 [China tabled peace proposals](#).

Ukraine and its allies have largely rejected China's proposals, instead offering [President Zelenskyy's own peace formula](#), which he proposed at the end of 2022, as the basis for any talks. Russia has, in turn, dismissed the Ukrainian peace formula and [accused Ukraine of not being ready for dialogue](#).

China's peace proposals, and the international reaction to them is examined in Library briefing, [Ukraine: China's pathway to peace?](#)

1 Suggested reading

- Institute for the Study of War, [Interactive map: Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#) and [Interactive Time-lapse: Russia's War in Ukraine](#)
- Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign daily assessments](#)
- Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Situation around Ukraine](#)
- Russian Ministry of Defence, [Reports on the progress of the special military operation](#)

¹⁸ Institute for the Study of War, [Russian Offensive Campaign Assessments](#)

¹⁹ Western military assistance to Ukraine is examined in greater detail in House of Commons Library, [Military assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion](#)

²⁰ Institute for the Study of War, Russian offensive campaign assessment, 5 June 2023 and Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, [Statement by Russian Minister of Defence](#), 6 June 2023

- Ministry of Defence, [Official twitter account](#). The MOD provides daily defence intelligence updates on the conflict in Ukraine.
- RUSI, [Crisis over Ukraine and European security](#)
- Chatham House, [Ukraine forum](#)



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