

## Armed Conflict

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### **Ukraine SITUATION UPDATE: Mass Russian military buildup near border causes alarm as uptick in clashes in Donbas continues, as of April 12; invasion remains unlikely in short-term**

#### Executive Summary

- A significant Russian military buildup has been witnessed near the Ukrainian border in the past week, including airborne, mobile infantry, and armored units.
- There has been an uptick in armed confrontations between Ukrainian armed forces and those of the two breakaway regions in Eastern Ukraine in recent weeks.
- President Volodymyr Zelensky has called for speeding up Ukraine's entry into NATO.
- Despite the buildup, Russia is not expected to launch a direct military intervention into Ukraine in the short-to-medium term, with the move likely to be an intimidation tactic.
- **Avoid all travel to and in the vicinity of the Donbas region due to the ongoing hostilities.**

#### Please be advised

##### Russia Military Build Up

- On March 31, a prominent US-based newspaper reported that Russia has deployed over 4,000 additional troops to the Ukrainian border amid a significant uptick in clashes within the disputed Donbas region in Eastern Ukraine.
- On March 30, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Colonel-General Ruslan Khomchak, reportedly announced that Russia had deployed 28 battalion tactical groups along the state border of Ukraine and across Crimea, which he referred to as the "temporarily occupied territories". Khomchak also stated that Moscow is planning to deploy 25 battalion tactical groups at the border under the guise of preparing for military drills. Roughly 20,000-25,000 troops in total, in addition to an unknown number of military advisers within the Donbas itself aiding the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) breakaway regions.
- On April 9, Khomchak rejected allegations that Ukrainian forces are preparing to attack the Donbas region.
- According to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Russian troops have been reinforcing their advanced units since March with reconnaissance teams and sniper units involving Russian army instructors in personnel training. It also claimed that Russian forces are keeping artillery units in combat readiness for use in certain areas, including towns and villages located in Crimea. Armoured, airborne, and motorized infantry units are reportedly gathering at various makeshift camps in

Crimea and near Voronezh, Rostov, and Krasnodar, as well as logistical, intelligence, and engineering units.

- Several independent media sources released videos of Russian units being deployed towards Ukraine, especially amassing along rail routes and highways towards the Kerch Strait Bridge linking Crimea to Krasnodar Krai. According to reports, troops have been brought in from the Western and Central Military Districts.



## Conflict in Donbas

- As per reports, clashes between Ukrainian Armed forces and Russia-backed forces intensified in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine since late March.
- The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine reported 20 ceasefire violations on April 9 and a total of 278 ceasefire violations in the Donetsk region so far in 2021 as of April 10. In the Luhansk region, six ceasefire violations were reported on April 9, with 229 total violations in 2021.
- On 2 April, the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Canada issued a notice to airmen (NOTAM) warning against potential airborne threats arising from the increased military activity in eastern Ukraine. On April 3, The US European Command raised its alert status to the highest level after skirmishes intensified between Russia-backed forces and Ukrainian troops in Donetsk.
- On April 7, Russia-backed forces reportedly violated the ceasefire seven times notably in Pisky, Opytne (north-west of Donetsk), Hnutove (north-east of Mariupol), Shyrokyne (20 kilometers east of Mariupol), Talakivka (17 kilometers north-east of Mariupol), and Vodiane in the Sea of Azov area.
- A former advisor to the Minister of Defense in Ukraine, Oleksandr Danyliuk, stated in an interview that Russian special services could “bomb” the Donetsk parade on May 9, subsequently attempting to blame Ukraine for the explosion, thereby using it as a pretext for launching a full-blown attack against Ukraine.

## Political & Diplomatic Developments

- On 6 April, President Volodymyr Zelensky urged NATO to speed up Ukraine's integration process and provide a membership "Action Plan" amid increasing tensions with Russia. Zelensky called on the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to expand NATO's military presence in the Black Sea region. The National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) of Ukraine announced that it is deciding measures towards Ukraine's swift integration with NATO.
- The Kremlin has stated that no attempts have been made by President Zelensky to talk directly with President Vladimir Putin in recent weeks, despite his declared readiness for such deliberations.
- The British Foreign Minister Dominic Raab announced that the UK was gravely concerned about Russian military activity threatening Ukraine. The European Union (EU) High Representative of Foreign Affairs Chief, Josep Borrell, extended the blocs support to Ukraine and announced that the EU will hold a meeting over the issue in April.
- On 8 April, German Chancellor Angela Merkel urged Putin to pull back the military deployment to de-escalate the tensions. However, Putin has accused Ukraine of provocative actions at the eastern border. Further, he criticized Zelensky's comments, stating that Kyiv's NATO membership will further deteriorate the situation and also warned NATO against sending troops to eastern Ukraine.
- On April 11, the European People's Party (EPP) leader, Manfred Weber, called on the EU and the USA to implement strict sanctions on Russia for the military build-up. The USA announced that Russian troop numbers at the Ukrainian borders are currently at the highest since the conflict in eastern Ukraine began in 2014. US President Joe Biden affirmed his "unwavering support" for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of "Russia's ongoing aggression in Donbas and Crimea."
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergri Lavrov reportedly warned Turkey and other regional actors not to support Ukraine's "militaristic sentiments" and criticized US naval activities in the Mediterranean and Black Sea on April 12.

### NOTABLE ACTORS IN CONFLICT IN EASTERN UKRAINE



## Assessments & Forecast

1. The spike in ceasefire violations by Ukrainian and Russian-backed forces in the conflict zones, along with the troop build-up, is likely part of Moscow's strategy of coercing Zelensky to make favorable concessions to Moscow after the likely collapse of the current peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine. That Zelensky continues to call for negotiations on a ceasefire, reaffirming his commitment to negotiate a truce supports this and further indicates that Moscow is likely to leverage the new negotiation process for concessions, such as the direct recognition of Russian allies in Crimea.
2. That the conflict escalation coincides with the decline in the domestic popularity of Putin over his government's handling the COVID-19 pandemic, along with opposition figure Alexei Navalny's imprisonment, indicates that the intensification is possibly aimed at serving as a distraction to the public before the upcoming general elections in Russia in September 2021. Putin's popularity jumped significantly following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, only dropping to roughly its current levels in 2018, when unpopular pension reforms were announced.
3. Zelensky's statements calling for a concrete "Action Plan" for NATO membership, highlights his increasing attempts to gather diplomatic and tangible support from Western countries and NATO amid an intensified standoff with Moscow. **FORECAST:** Despite Kyiv's intensified calls, Ukraine's accession to NATO is unlikely in the near-to-medium term, with NATO countries likely to focus on formulating a new peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine. Additionally, given existing tensions between members concerning how to confront Russia, various leaders will be extremely hesitant to accept a new member that would oblige them to send troops to an area that would further escalate direct tensions with Moscow.
4. **FORECAST:** Russia is unlikely to withdraw military build-up in the Donbas region despite repeated calls from the West, further deteriorating its diplomatic and political relations with the EU and NATO countries. In this context, NATO is expected to step up military presence in the Black Sea region in the medium-term. However, additional military deployment from NATO is likely to trigger a similar response from the Kremlin, further elevating tensions in the region.
5. **FORECAST:** While Moscow is likely to continue the deployment of troops, along with supporting logistical buildup in Crimea and at the Ukrainian border, an intervention or large-scale offensive by the Russian forces into Ukraine, including the Donbas, is unlikely in the near-to-medium term. Further, recent statements issued by Moscow indicate that it will continue to justify the build-up as a defensive action against alleged "Ukrainian provocations." The uptick in violence is expected to persist moving forward, with sporadic armed confrontations and Russian-military-backed operations likely to intensify particularly around the border areas in the near term.
6. **FORECAST:** With Russia unlikely to heed to calls demanding the withdrawal of military experts and other units in the Donbas region in the near term, the EU and the USA will likely announce tougher sanctions against Moscow to increase international pressure. With certain EU members calling on the bloc to impose sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, the EU is likely to mull over targeted sanctions on companies involved in the project in the near-term, further delaying its completion moving forward. That said, as long as Germany, the destination of the pipeline, continues to resist enacting sanctions, the impact will be limited.

## PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN APPROVAL RATING: JANUARY 2014 – FEBRUARY 2021



### Recommendations

1. Those operating in Ukraine are advised to avoid all travel to and in the vicinity of the Donbas regions of Donetsk and Luhansk due to the continued uptick in armed clashes.
2. Avoid nonessential travel to Crimea due to the military buildup and potential penalties from Western governments.
3. If currently operating in or in the vicinity of the abovementioned areas, check the preparedness of emergency evacuation plans and update all security protocols.
4. For more information on the security situation please contact [intel@max-security.com](mailto:intel@max-security.com).