

March 19-20

A brief overview of the situation in Ukraine

- 1. DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CONFLICT.** Over the weekend several Ukrainian towns were subjected to shelling and missile strikes by Russia. This included the town of Delyatyn in the Ivano-Frankivsk oblast, which was hit by a **Kindzhal (Russian for dagger) ballistic missile**, and **Mariupol which was targeted by the normobaric rockets**. Additionally, an air bomb dropped on Mariupol destroyed a school of arts where 400 local citizens were hiding. The city has also been shelled from the Sea of Azov by Russian war ships. In Kreminna (Luhansk oblast) a Russian tank destroyed an old people's home, claiming 70 lives.

The probability of the Belarusian Armed Forces joining the war in Ukraine has increased. On Saturday the entire staff of Belarus' embassy in Ukraine left the country. According to information, Russian troops are carrying out forceful mobilization operation in the temporarily occupied territories. They are targeting men aged between 60-65 years old who had previously never participated in hostilities. Russia is also considering engaging members of the National Movement of the Young Army Cadets aged 17-18 in the war. **Due to the massive mobilization and departure of untrained men to the front, Eastern Ukraine (aside from a possible man-made ecological catastrophe caused by the war) is faced with the threat of depopulation and gender imbalance.**

Russia has resorted to mining the Black Sea, while accusing Ukraine of doing it. Ukrainian experts have put forward a proposal to: 1) urgently offer Black Sea littoral states the possibility to set up a joint military naval operation to demine the sea as well as launch an aviation group. This group would not only patrol the air space on the territorial waters of the littoral states but also over their Exclusive Naval Economic Zones; b) request that NATO send the Permanent Mediterranean Demining Group ,NATO Nr 2 ' to the Black Sea to pursue the same goal.

- 2. POLITICAL DIMENSION.** President V. Zelenskyy has delivered speeches in Israeli and Swiss parliaments, as well as giving an interview to CNN. In the interview he stressed that in the negotiations with the Russian Federation he is not prepared to make any compromise that would violate Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Pro-Russian political parties have been banned in Ukraine following a National Security and Defense Council decree. Polarisation vis-à-vis Ukraine possibly waiving its NATO-membership aspiration has returned to the political discourse (Ukraine's political leadership and representatives of the opposition have been forced to declare their unity to prevent a social and political crisis). From now on the National Security and Defense Council has the power to alter the borders of the temporarily occupied territories in order to be able to react more speedily to challenges, obviating the need to have Parliament approve its decrees. According to Russian experts, the Russian government is psychologically not ready to reach agreements on anything. Russia is using these negotiations as a tactical move. At the same time the Kremlin cannot consolidate support from its potential allies. The statement made by the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China regarding its government's unwillingness to support the Russian Federation is one example.

- 3. THE HUMANITARIAN DIMENSION.** Humanitarian 'green corridors' continue to be set up in different oblasts. Over the weekend approximately 10,000 people were evacuated from Mariupol, Kharkiv and other cities. Meanwhile, Russia is forcefully evacuating citizens from Mariupol to Russia. Those people who have managed to escape from the city and reach small settlements located nearby (such as Manhush and Melekyno) have now found themselves in a humanitarian catastrophe, without access to food or basic necessities such as water, heating, medicine, etc. According to official data, as of now nearly 120 children have succumbed to Russian shelling with some 140 wounded. Russia continues to fuel the artificial humanitarian crisis that has affected the territories controlled by its troops.

Russian troops continue to kidnap pro-Ukrainian activists and representatives of the local authorities in Kherson, Melitopol and other cities where anti-occupation civil disobedience demonstrations are taking place. The food crisis is becoming ever more acute in Kyiv. The choice and quantity of food available in supermarkets has significantly decreased. With some 2 million citizens in Kyiv, the threat of famine in case of a siege is a major concern. **During the first month of the war approximately 10 million people (a quarter Ukraine's entire population) have become internally displaced people or refugees.**

4. INFORMATION DIMENSION. RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA. The official public discourse in Russia remains dominated by messages of an increasing support for Russian President, Vladimir Putin, by society. According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, since 27 February the level of support for the special operation has increased from 65 to 67%. An absolute support of 51% is observed in all age categories. Russian citizens are perfectly clear about the goals of the operation, namely: to protect Russia's borders (62% of respondents), to protect the populations living in the DPR and LPR' (59%), to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and to prevent NATO from setting up bases in Ukraine' (39%}'. This data was collected at the start of the special operation in Ukraine. The level of trust of Putin has increased from 77 to 79%. Information about losses incurred by the Ukrainian army continues to be disseminated.

Manipulative information is being spread about preparations by Ukraine for chemical attacks', i.e. mining of ammonia storages and the plans to detonate them. Narratives about foreign mercenaries fighting for the Ukrainian Armed Forces continues to be effectively disseminated. The shelling of infrastructure in western Ukraine is sold as a necessary counter measures taken against "foreign mercenaries". Representatives of the National Guard (Azov) have been accused of planning an attack on representatives of foreign embassies and consulates in Lviv. Furthermore, the Russian media landscape is saturated with disinformation about acts of vandalism committed by Ukrainian refugees in EU countries aimed, in particular, at Russian memorial sites.

In Russian regions, those who have expressing opinions on Putin's policy are being detained. Examples include the case of a one-man picket in St. Petersburg. The responsibility for humanitarian crimes is blamed on Ukraine's government and military. General narratives that pursue the goal of dehumanizing Ukrainians and reject their independence are also popular. Information about the evacuation of Ukrainian citizens from Mariupol to the temporarily occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by the RF continues to be widely disseminated. Such Russian actions Russia are presented as humanitarian initiatives. In addition, narratives about the crimes committed by Ukrainian neo-Nazis dominate the Russian information space. The appalling situation in Mariupol is presented as a liberation from Nazi's, who use the local population as humans shields.