



## MAIN TAKEAWAY of the month

This month was marked by the EU summit in Brussels on December 14-15, which opened accession negotiations for the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, despite Budapest's opposition towards the membership of the latter. However, Kyiv was not so successful in obtaining new large-scale aid packages, as the US Senate blocked a \$110 billion all-encompassing package (including around \$50 billion for Ukraine), while Hungarian leader Viktor Orban blocked a 50 billion euro EU-wide package.

On the frontline, Ukraine managed to target several military objectives located both in conquered territories and within Russia (ammo and oil depots, railway infrastructure), while Russia continued targeting Ukrainian port infrastructure and pressuring Avdiivka and its vicinity, with little advancements registered. However, mid-month reports claim that Ukraine is forced to rationalize its military equipment, due to shortages. Meanwhile, Russia launched a massive cyberattack on Ukraine's main mobile operator. Ukraine's newly-promised aid packages consisted of, among others, artillery shells, missiles for HIMARS systems, or minehunting ships.

As the EU adopted its 12th sanctions package against Russia, US and German authorities are preparing innovative measures to use frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine. Lastly, last month's trucker protests at the Polish-Ukrainian border continue, with farmers' unions now joining, while the Slovak-Ukrainian border blockade ended.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin announced his candidacy for president, with elections to be occurring over a three-day period, during March 15-17 next year and including annexed territories from Ukraine. Additionally, Putin also stated in a yearly televised conference that Russia does not need a new mobilization, that Odessa/Ukraine's South-East is historical Russian territory, and that Russia's GDP allegedly rose by 3.5%, while unemployment decreased, as a result of the militarization of Russia's economy. Despite that, estimates show that Russia's real inflation rate might be around 48%, instead of the officially-declared 7.5%. This is reflected in a rise in eggs and poultry meat prices and in the formation of queues for these products. Additionally, a significant increase in raids for recruitment purposes has been noted, while Rosgvardia and FSB receive new legislative enrollment options. Meanwhile, no contact has been made with opposition figure Alexei Navalny since early December, as pressure mounts on relatives of the mobilized who continue protesting peacefully.

Foreign policy-wise, this month was marked by Putin's visits in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in the context of increasing commercial ties. The Russian president also met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit in Moscow, while Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin met with Xi Jinping.

In the Republic of Moldova, the adoption of a national defense strategy on December 15 identified Russia as a primary security threat and marked a significant step in aligning Moldova with the West. The EU's decision to initiate accession talks was a foreign policy milestone. Recent military exercises aimed to bolster Moldova's defense capabilities, while the acquisition of an advanced aerial surveillance system strengthened anti-aircraft defense. In energy, a Memorandum of Understanding between Moldova and Romania seeks to enhance natural gas and electricity network connections, including pipeline expansions and power line projects.

In recent developments across the Balkans, significant shifts in regional dynamics have taken place. In terms of regional security cooperation, Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye are planning to sign an agreement on joint mine

clearance of the Black Sea on 11 January, the most important joint security initiative in the region since the start of Russia's invasion. Also, Turkey and Greece signed a non-binding declaration of friendship, marking a turning point in their relationship. Plus, The EU seeks to revitalize its ties with Turkey to enhance regional stability, despite policy differences. Meanwhile, Bulgaria joins the European Union's joint air defense initiative, and Ukraine proposes reversing gas flows within the Trans-Balkan pipeline. In EU accession news, the General Affairs Council calls for revising conditions for Serbia's negotiations, aligning them with obligations related to Kosovo normalization. Serbia's recent legislative elections saw the ruling party secure a significant victory, albeit with reports of irregularities.

---

## WAR in Ukraine

On the frontline, little movement has been registered, as the Ukrainian army is located, according to its Defense Minister, [between the second and third line of Russian defenses](#). Ukraine organized significant attacks on Russia's own and occupied territory, such as [destroying ammo depots in Svatove](#) or [oil depots in Feodosia](#), [attacks by the Freedom of Russia Legion in Belgorod](#), or the [destruction of a railway line deep in Siberia](#), responsible for military supply. In response to increasing internal attacks, Russia started [cracking networks of Ukrainian spies in Crimea](#), while also [increasing special service presence in Kherson](#) to counter any Ukrainian resistance fighters. All the while, the Russian army continued conducting drone and missile strikes on Ukrainian cereal infrastructure, especially [Danube port infrastructure](#). Moscow especially attempted [pushing in Avdiivka and its vicinity](#), with little results, while also [attacking a thermal power plant in the frontline region](#). While Russia maintains a high artillery power, recent reports show that Russian forces are more and more often using [low-quality shells received from North Korea](#), which are often defective, sometimes causing damage to cannon and mortar barrels and even injuring soldiers. Russian cyberattacks have been a trend throughout this month, both against Ukraine and its allies. The most significant attack was the one on [Ukraine's top mobile operator, Kyivstar](#), which resulted in people not receiving air assault alerts on their phones.

In the middle part of December, the conveyed perspectives by the Ukrainian side and its allies became less optimistic. As such, [Oleksandr Syrskyi](#), commander of the Ukrainian ground forces, says Russian troops continue to carry out offensive attempts in the directions of Kupyansk, Lyman and Bakhmut and stated that the situation in these areas is "difficult". Brigadier General [Oleksandr Tarnavskyi](#) added that Ukrainian troops on the frontline were facing a shortage of artillery shells and had curtailed some military operations due to a lack of foreign assistance. Simultaneously, according to *Bloomberg* sources, some European allies have [quietly begun to consider the impact of a NATO failure in Ukraine](#), as the discussion among officials has allegedly shifted from "whether" Russia might attack to a focus on concrete preparations for this once unthinkable prospect. There is an ever-increasing worry that without the necessary military aid, Ukraine will be forced to lose more territory and even accept a ceasefire agreement on Russian terms.

Regarding the previous announcement of the placement of F-16 training sites used by Ukraine on the territory of neighboring countries, such as Romania, [Konstantin Gavrilov](#), head of the Russian delegation to the military security and arms control talks in Vienna, responded by stating that "Russia will resort to response measures, if Kiev uses NATO air bases for sorties of western-made planes". Despite these threats, [Bulgaria agreed to let Ukraine use its airspace for F-16 training](#) and to host four Ukrainian infantry/mechanized companies for combat training.

Lastly, rumors have been circulating regarding the tensions between President Zelensky and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valery Zaluzhnyi. As such, it has been stated in both Ukrainian and Western media that [Zelensky has been bypassing Zaluzhnyi when communicating with his subordinates](#), creating separate communication lines with the chief of the ground and the air forces. Following this, [Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko](#) stated in an interview that Zelensky is becoming increasingly autocratic.

On the subject of Ukrainian aid, Ukraine has received from the [United States a \\$175 million package](#), containing artillery shells, HIMARS ammo, HARM and anti-tank missiles. Furthermore, amid talks in Washington, the US and Ukraine agreed to increase [co-production between the two countries' industrial bases](#), as Kyiv agreed with [two American companies to produce 155 mm artillery shells](#). Meanwhile, [Germany delivered a new military package](#), containing 1750 artillery shells, grenade launchers, patrol vehicles, trucks and 10 Vector drones. In fact, the producers of the Vector, [Quantum Systems, vouched to open a research and development center in Ukraine](#). In the meantime, German company [Rheinmetall will provide 142 million euros worth of 155 mm artillery shells](#). Moreover, Sweden and Denmark will donate [241 million euros worth of CV90 light tanks to](#)

[Kyiv](#). In the case of the UK, it announced a [7.75 million pound humanitarian aid package](#), while also providing [two minehunting ships](#).

Regarding European weapon production, [Finland announced it will start producing artillery shells for Ukraine](#). However, at a European level, countries are lagging in production capacity, as only [480.000 artillery shells](#) have been produced out of the million promised by next spring, and EU countries have currently placed orders for only 60,000 artillery shells. Despite this, to compensate, Ukraine plans to produce [11.000 medium- and long-range drones in 2024](#).

On humanitarian aid, [Japan pledged to invest an extra \\$4.5 billion for the reconstruction of Ukraine](#), while the [World Bank sent a \\$1.34 billion package](#), meant to cover pensions and wages for teachers and first responders. Ukraine has also received €150 million in grants from the EU under the ["Support for Ukraine's Early Recovery"](#) funding agreement.

Lastly, on a strategic level, [the United States Congress adopted the Black Sea security strategy](#), which is aimed at providing security assistance to regional allies and partners, strengthening regional energy security, identifying opportunities for US foreign direct investment, managing with allies and partners the effects of Russian and Chinese economic coercion, and increasing US engagement in economic and infrastructure development.

A highlight of this month has been represented by the ongoing disputes in the US Congress regarding approving a consistent aid package for Ukraine. Early in December, the [White House launched a clear warning that the US might run out of funds to militarily aid Ukraine](#) by the end of this month, which makes a positive decision from Congress imperative. In that sense, US [Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen](#) argued that the US would be responsible for Ukraine's defeat if more aid was not to be approved. Furthermore, the [Pentagon also stated that it will run out of funds to refurbish weapons and equipment sent to Ukraine on December 30](#).

Despite [Zelensky's attempts to address US senators](#) and the efforts of the [Ukrainian presidential delegation](#) to convince US officials to provide equipment that was stipulated in a [weapon demand list](#), the results were limited. Regardless of the efforts by the Biden administration to persuade anti-aid Congress Republicans, by showing openness to [more restrictive asylum and deportation laws which hardline Republicans seek](#), the [\\$110.5 billion package that also includes Ukraine aid was blocked in the US Senate on December 6](#). It soon became clear that [the US Congress will end 2023 without validating the package](#), as Senate leaders are hoping for another vote on this issue early next year. In the meantime, the Kremlin and its acolytes [cheered the blocking of Ukraine aid](#), while Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor [Orban organized a meeting with radical Republicans in Washington, in order to persuade them to continue blocking it](#).

Meanwhile in the European Union, [Viktor Orban blocked the 50 billion euro aid package for Ukraine](#), despite the fact that Brussels unfroze 10 billion euros of EU funds for Budapest. However, alternatives are on the table: from creating an EU-wide trust fund that excludes Hungary to [applying Article 7 against the country](#), which would entail the suspension of its voting rights, albeit some countries are reticent regarding the latter option. Nevertheless, in the short term, Orban achieved his goals and [the next EU special summit](#) on the issue of the aforementioned aid package for Kyiv will be held on February 1.

When it comes to the implementation of sanctions against Russia, [the EU adopted its 12th sanction package](#), similar to the ones [previously imposed by G7 countries](#), consisting of a direct ban on Russian imports of non-industrial diamonds from 1 January and a phased ban on diamond imports from third countries from March. Other measures include tightening the evidence required of companies claiming to adhere to the G7 Russian oil price cap. The package also added measures to prevent Russia from obtaining dual-use goods, forcing EU companies to require their partners to sign contracts banning re-exports to Russia for certain products. Also in the EU, Brussels will [offer Member States the option of ending Russian and Belarusian energy imports](#), without needing to pay hefty compensations. Meanwhile, London announced the creation of a new governmental unit, the [Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation \(OTSI\)](#).

Following last month's publication of the "Cyprus Confidential" investigation, which indicates how Kremlin-related businessmen were helped by local lawyers and accountants to avoid sanctions, the [FBI sent a team to investigate](#). As a result, [Russian companies started leaving the island nation](#). Furthermore the US-based [Office of Foreign Assets Control](#) (OFAC) imposed new sanctions on companies based in Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, Cyprus or Hong Kong which aided in the procurement of electronics with military usage for Russian clients.

Another US-proposed solution to using Russian frozen assets in Ukraine's support was proposed to the other G7 countries and consists of [self-recognising as "victims" of Russian aggression](#) against Ukraine and later use this basis to confiscate \$280 billion from the Russian Central Bank, a measure that would be consistent with International Law. Meanwhile, after a Russian stock exchange subsidiary based in Germany tried to illegally transfer frozen funds (approx. 720 million euros), [Berlin authorities are now filing documents to seize the sum](#), thus creating a possibly fruitful precedent for other European countries.

Regarding the trucker protests that started last month at Ukraine's Western borders, Kyiv experienced a [40% export decrease](#) through the relevant Polish-Ukrainian checkpoints thus far. As a solution, Poland started [processing empty Ukrainian trucks](#), while [Kyiv transported other trucks on rail](#), to avoid the blockade. Later, while the Dorohusk-Yahodyn blockade was initially [lifted around 11 December](#), it was not only resumed shortly after, but reinforced, as the [Polish farmers' union, United Village, joined the truck drivers in protest](#). On the positive side, the Slovak truckers union, [UNAS, ceased their blockade on December 15](#), stating that the protest objectives were met.

---

## Ukraine and Moldova's European Integration

Despite Hungary's veto over the EU 50-million-euro aid package, Budapest did not intervene in the advancement of Ukraine's European integration process. As such, on December 14, the European Union decided [to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and with the Republic of Moldova](#). EU leaders also granted EU candidate status to Georgia and said they would advance an EU candidacy for Bosnia and Herzegovina once it reaches the "necessary degree of compliance" with the various conditions for membership. In reaction, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky claimed that this is "a victory for Ukraine. A victory for the whole of Europe. A victory that motivates, inspires and strengthens". Meanwhile, Moldovan president [Maia Sandu celebrated the opening of the negotiations with hundreds of people](#) in front of the Presidency building, giving speeches together with the EU ambassador in Chisinau, Janis Mazeiks.

Hungarian Prime Minister [Viktor Orban was not in the negotiation room](#) when the above-mentioned decisions were taken. This left the other 26 EU leaders to approve Ukraine's path to membership with the necessary unanimity which, under EU rules, is met even if one leader is absent. At the same time, Orbán will still be able to say he did not vote in favor. The Hungarian prime minister still considers the decision, especially regarding Ukraine, "completely senseless, irrational and wrong".

Reacting to the start of accession negotiations for the two Eastern European states, [the Kremlin said the decision was a politicized one that could destabilize the bloc](#) and praised Hungary for opposing the move. "Negotiations to join the EU can last for years or decades. The EU has always had strict criteria for accession and it is obvious that at the moment neither Ukraine nor Moldova meets these criteria," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Prior to this EU-wide decision, [Ukraine approved four bills](#): on minority rights (a key demand both as an accession criterion and from the Budapest government), on staff increases in the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, and on offering additional power for the National Agency on Corruption Prevention on assets checks, and provisions on public declaration of assets. However, [Hungary's reticence towards Kyiv's integration](#) and opposition towards further aid remains. Similar positions were also conveyed by [Marian Carey](#), Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Slovak Parliament, who claimed that Ukraine is not ready to begin negotiations on joining the European Union.

---

## RUSSIA - internal and external dynamics

On a political level, the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation (CEC) determined that [the presidential elections in Russia would take place over three days](#), from March 15 to 17, 2024. They will also be held [in the annexed territories of Ukraine](#). Following CEC's decision, [Vladimir Putin announced his candidacy for a fifth presidential term](#), as this new term would amount to [six years](#). According to an analysis by the Russian publication RBK, [Putin's team and proxies for the presidential elections are expected to be renewed by approximately 40%](#) compared to the list from the previous 2018 campaign, including the addition of war correspondents. On December 17, 2023, the ruling party United Russia's Congress, [unanimously endorsed Vladimir Putin's nomination for the presidency](#). Additionally, Sergei Mironov, the leader of the "A Just Russia - For Truth" party, [a controlled opposition political faction, announced support for Putin in the elections](#).

According to CEC information, as of December 20, [applications from 16 individuals intending to participate in the presidential elections](#) have been registered.

The team of Russian opposition figure [Alexei Navalny has urged Russian citizens to participate in the presidential elections](#) in March 2024, encouraging them to vote for any candidate other than Vladimir Putin. Navalny's team has also announced an anti-Putin campaign, [implementing banners with QR codes in various urban centers](#) in Russia, redirecting to their website titled "Russia Without Putin." In the context of the actions taken by Alexei Navalny and his team, the staff of Penitentiary No. 6 in Melekhovo [informed his lawyer that the opposition figure is no longer in the institution's records](#). Since December 5, 2023, [Navalny's lawyers have been unable to contact him](#), having no information about his current status. Furthermore, the lawyers of Moscow municipal deputy Alexei Gorinov, convicted for spreading false information about the war in Ukraine, have stated that they [have been unable to contact him after December 8](#).

On December 14, Vladimir Putin participated in "[Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin](#)," a combined televised format that included elements of a press conference and responses to citizens' questions. In the program, Putin largely reiterated his statements from the past two years. Regarding the military situation, Putin expressed confidence, stating that [Russia would not need a new mobilization](#), as there are sufficient human resources among volunteers. According to him, there are currently [617,000 Russian military personnel in the "special military operation" zone](#). He also claimed that on top of the 300,000 people called up for service last year, another [486,000 have signed up voluntarily as contract soldiers](#). He also asserted that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, and [Odessa and the entire southeast of Ukraine are historically Russian territories](#). Concerning the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, Putin stated that peace would be possible only when Russia achieves its objectives in the ongoing special operation, which remain the same: [denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine](#). Additionally, Putin signed a decree [to increase the army by 170,000](#) in the context of NATO enlargement.

In order to maintain human resources for the army, [raids are applied against new Russian citizens](#). The number of [raids has increased](#), being carried out in large cities such as [St. Petersburg](#) and Moscow, but also in smaller cities at various enterprises; in the Moscow region alone, more than [350 people who have obtained Russian citizenship have been sent to the army](#) as a result of these raids. The autumn recruitment, which began on 1 October, will end on 31 December, but [human rights activists call it the most brutal in recent Russian history](#). Police are looking for potential recruits in hostels, shops, cafes, universities.

Since December, Article 18 of the Law on the procedure for leaving and entering the Russian Federation has entered into force. It obliges Russian citizens banned from traveling abroad [to surrender their passports to the authorities within five days of being notified](#). Travel bans may be imposed on categories such as conscripts, FSB employees, convicted persons or those with access to state secret information.

Also in December, the State Duma of Russia adopted a series of measures in its final reading aimed at consolidating the authoritarian regime of President Vladimir Putin. The first of these measures involves [the adoption of a law allowing the conscription of Russian citizens for mandatory service in the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia](#) (FSB). The second adopted measure [addresses criminal liability for statements regarding Russian guards](#) (Rosgvardia) involved in the conflict in Ukraine. Furthermore, a legislative initiative was adopted that grants [Rosgvardia the right to form its own volunteer units](#).

Economically, at his annual press conference, Vladimir Putin highlighted positive economic indicators for Russia despite the downturn in 2022, [announcing GDP growth of 3.5% in 2023, low unemployment and wage increases](#). However, [this economic growth is largely attributed to the reorientation towards the military sector and the generous war spending budget](#). For example, Russian Prime Minister Mishustin reported a threefold increase in the production of armored vehicles and a twofold increase in UAVs. The reorientation towards the military sector has supported economic growth, [but has affected civilian sectors, reducing their share](#). However, [experts](#) warn that this growth is not sustainable as civilian output, living standards and quality of life have declined.

Sanctions and lower oil prices hurt exports for November, and inflation rose significantly. Although officially inflation is reported at 7.5%, calculations show that since the start of the war, [real inflation has reached 47.9%](#), affecting the population. As a result, the [Central Bank raised the key interest rate from 15% to 16%](#), to counter inflation for the fifth consecutive increase since July. Over the past month, the crisis linked to supply problems and [rising prices for eggs and poultry meat](#) has been felt by the population to the extent that it has led in some regions [to the rationing of eggs in shops](#) and [queues waiting for production from suppliers at points of sale](#). Putin acknowledged the problem and [pointed to the government's failure to manage the situation](#), promising an improvement.

In Russia, discontent over the indefinite mobilization of soldiers continues to grow, sparking protests and [innovative actions](#). Relatives of those mobilized are organizing peaceful protests, including [flower-laying](#) and

[flash mobs, expressing their desire for the soldiers to return home](#). However, at Vladimir Putin's conference, [the subject of mobilization was not raised](#), adding to the frustration. [Questions about ending the mobilization are popular among citizens](#), and Putin previously mentioned [that a second wave is not necessary](#). At the same time, the authorities have reacted harshly, visiting activists and [summoning them, threatening them with criminal charges](#) and [even sending the military to assault units if the protests continue](#). An official reaction from the Russian Defence Ministry said the Russian military will serve until Vladimir Putin signs a decree ending the "partial mobilization" campaign, [calling the proposal to limit the term of military service "inappropriate"](#).

On foreign policy, Vladimir Putin [conducted on December 6 an official visit to the United Arab Emirates \(UAE\) and Saudi Arabia](#). According to Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesperson, [four Su-35S fighter jets accompanied the Russian President's plane](#) throughout the flight to Abu Dhabi. During meetings with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, discussions covered a wide range of topics, [including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#), the Ukraine crisis, energy sector cooperation, and collaboration within OPEC+. Notably, since the Ukraine invasion, the UAE has become Russia's primary trade partner in the Arab world, [with bilateral trade reaching \\$9 billion in 2022](#) and \$8.8 billion in the first nine months of 2023. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and the [UAE are set to join BRICS from January 1, 2024](#). The visit may also be linked to discussions on stabilizing the global oil market amid declining prices. Subsequently, Moscow hosted Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on December 7. Earlier, on December 5, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that [Russia and Iran are working to finalize a new fundamental agreement between the two countries](#). No official statements on military cooperation were made. However, it is worth noting that at the end of November, Iran's Deputy Defense Minister announced that [Iran had completed arrangements for Russia to supply Su-35 fighter jets, Mi-28 attack helicopters, and Yak-130 pilot training planes](#).

Moreover, Russian Prime Minister [Mikhail Mishustin visited China from December 19 to 20](#). During the visit, several bilateral trade agreements were signed. Additionally, on December 20, [Mishustin met with Chinese President Xi Jinping](#), who [emphasized the importance of deepening Russian-Chinese cooperation in the commercial, economic, and energy sectors](#). In the first 11 months of 2023, bilateral trade between Russia and China recorded a notable increase of 26.7% compared to the same period the previous year, [reaching a record level of \\$218.17 billion](#). Furthermore, in December, [Russia began regular deliveries of agricultural products via the New Russia-China Land Corridor](#), in accordance with an agreement signed in October.

---

## Evolutions in the Republic of MOLDOVA

In December 2023, the Republic of Moldova experienced significant military and political developments. Tensions between Moldova and Russia escalated following remarks by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who suggested at the OSCE meeting on November 30 that [Moldova could be the next target in the West's alleged hybrid war against Russia](#). Additionally, Alexandr Kalinin, a supporter of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has [expressed readiness to lead a guerrilla force against Moldova to overthrow President Sandu's Western-oriented leadership](#).

President Sandu has been critical of Russia's actions in Ukraine and [expressed concerns over Moscow's attempts to destabilize her government](#). Amid these tensions, the Republic of Moldova is making strides to align more closely with the West. On December 15, the adoption of the national defense strategy took place, a decision praised by President Maia Sandu as a vital step towards the nation's security and stability, [calling for anchoring Moldova alongside its Western allies and identifying Russia as a threat to the former Soviet state](#). She explained that the new security strategy identifies the key dangers confronting Moldova and the methods to address them effectively. According to her, the primary [threats to Moldova's national security are the hostile actions of the Russian Federation towards the country and the entrenched corruption within Moldova](#).

In addition, [the European Union's agreement to start accession talks for Moldova's EU membership](#) at the EU summit in Brussels on December 14-15, mark significant foreign policy achievements for the country. President Sandu views the national defense strategy and the EU's decision to open membership negotiations as crucial steps in [transforming Moldova from a vulnerable state to a strong, modern, and resilient European nation](#), enhancing the security and stability for its approximately 3.5 million citizens.

In recent updates the [Moldovan Defense Ministry initiated military exercises near Transnistria](#), a Russia-backed breakaway region, from December 17 to December 22 at the Bulboaca Training Center. The training will take

place in [accordance with the National Army Training Plan for 2023](#). Additionally, the Republic of Moldova has recently [obtained a state-of-the-art aerial surveillance system, as announced by the Ministry of Defense](#). The Ministry of Defense has disclosed that the radar system was acquired using funds from the national defense budget, with support from the French company "THALES," which provided both information and logistical assistance. Anatolie Nosatii, the Minister of Defense, emphasized the critical importance of this system in bolstering the nation's anti-aircraft defense capabilities. This news comes shortly after Prime Minister Dorin Recean, emphasized the [urgent need for his nation to acquire a state-of-the-art air defense system](#).

On December 18, President Vladimir [Putin signed a presidential decree, offering a simplified process for citizens of Moldova](#), Belarus, and Kazakhstan to obtain Russian citizenship. This new approach involves applying for a permit and subsequently passing a test on Russian history, rather than requiring proof of permanent residency in Russia. In reaction to President Putin's executive order, Prime Minister Dorin Recean [characterized this move as an attempt to enlist individuals as "cannon fodder"](#) for the ongoing and perplexing conflict initiated by Russia. In response, he urged Moldovan citizens not to accept Russian citizenship.

In terms of energy, the leader of the Moldovan national gas company, Moldovagaz, where Gazprom is the majority stakeholder, has [suggested that Moldova consider assuming responsibility for the transportation of Russian gas currently transiting through Ukraine](#). In addition, [Moldova and Romania's Ministries of Energy have agreed to sign a Memorandum of Understanding](#) to boost natural gas and electricity network interconnection projects. For example, in the case of natural gas, the plan involves expanding the Iasi-Ungheni-Chisinau gas pipeline and for electricity. It also includes projects like a 400 kV Overhead Power Line between Suceava and Balti.

---

## The Balkans

In terms of regional stability developments, Türkiye has been taking both small and large-scale steps, especially along with its Black Sea partners. As such, Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye are planning to sign [an agreement on joint mine clearance of the Black Sea on 11 January](#), after the third round of the Black Sea Mine Action Task Force meeting occurred on 22-23 November. This minesweeping force would not be considered a NATO operation. Still, it would be the first major joint action by Black Sea NATO states since the start of Russia's invasion in Ukraine.

Furthermore, on the 7th of December, following a highly relevant [meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis](#) in Athens, the two long-standing adversaries signed a new, non-binding declaration of friendship, marking a significant turning point in their relationship. Following the tension that started last year when [Greece locked the Turkish army's F-16s](#) with Russian-made S-300 missiles, this meeting represents a shift from years of turbulent Greek-Turkish relations marked by disagreements. Key outcomes of their discussion included plans to enhance trade, establish communication channels between coastguards to address migration concerns, and explore new agreements in various sectors such as electricity, trade, technology, tourism, and economic relations.

In addition, the [EU wants to revive its political and economic relationship with Turkey](#) in a bid to boost regional stability, despite a deep rift between Brussels and Ankara's foreign policies and stalled EU membership talks. The recommendations in cooperation include increased trade, energy, transport, and migration management. These developments are significant for both regional development and stability. On the contrary however, [Turkey appears to be in no rush to endorse Sweden's NATO accession](#) and might not engage in discussions regarding a protocol for this matter until early 2024. Fuat Oktay, the previous vice president of Turkey and current MP, said the US should stop making this issue a precondition for the sale of F-16 warplanes to Ankara and suggested that these two processes could move forward in tandem.

Internal tensions have risen with Athens issuing a stern warning to Tirana, at a meeting of the Council of Permanent Representatives of the EU, COREPER, stating that it will [obstruct Albania's progress toward EU accession](#) unless Albania permits Fredi Beleri, the detained mayor-elect of Himara and an ethnic Greek, to take office.

In terms of military strengthening, [Bulgaria will purchase integrated air defense systems for NATO](#) within the framework of the European Union's joint air defense initiative, Sky Shield, initiated under the leadership of Germany, which emerged as a response to Russia's attacks on Ukraine. Bulgaria, which is the 12th European country to join the initiative, is expected to purchase Arrow 3 and Patriot systems together with other countries.

In terms of energy, Ukraine's state gas transit operator has put forth a proposal to reverse gas flows within the Trans-Balkan pipeline. This would [enable the transportation of gas from the Balkans to Central and Eastern European countries via Ukraine](#). Dmytro Lyppa, the head of GTSOU, stated that this adjustment would cater to the needs of customers and would open up new avenues for storing gas in Ukraine. In addition, [The Kremlin earned \\$468 million between August and October 2023 from Bulgarian company Neftohim](#) by exploiting a price ceiling loophole for Russian oil. The Neftohim refinery in Burgas imported Russian crude oil at prices exceeding the European Commission's ceiling, resulting in substantial revenue for Russia.

Some important updates took place in relation to the accession negotiations into the European Union. The European Union's General Affairs Council has [called on the European Council and European Commission to revise the conditions for Serbia's Chapter 35 EU negotiations](#), aligning them with the obligations outlined in the Agreement on the normalization of relations with Kosovo. In their recent meeting, the Council emphasized the need for urgent proposals to amend Chapter 35 benchmarks by the end of January 2024. Furthermore, in the country's latest internal developments, [Serbia's ruling party secured a decisive victory](#) in the recent legislative snap elections held. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), under President Alexander [Vučić's leadership, secured a notable 46.7% of the votes](#), granting them the ability to form a new national government independently. The center-left opposition alliance Serbia Against Violence came second with 23.56% of the votes and the Socialist Party of Serbia third with 6.56%. Amid these electoral developments, there have been [reports concerning irregularities on voting day](#), including allegations of voter-bullying and bribes, causing protesters to take the streets and the [opposition to demand the annulment of Belgrade election results](#). For example, numerous individuals shared their firsthand experiences through videos which depicted individuals who were [brought in from areas in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina under ethnic Serb control](#) with new identity cards. A report issued by observers from the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\) subsequently detailed multiple irregularities](#) and Matthew Miller, the spokesperson for the United States Department of State, called upon Serbia to thoroughly investigate these irregularities and encouraged the country to collaborate with the OSCE in addressing the raised concerns. The new Serbian government resulting from this election has yet to be formed.

Meanwhile, many politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina have chosen to remain silent regarding the latest setback in the initiation of EU accession talks, the [nation's citizens have expressed deep disappointment in response to this recent delay in their European Union aspirations](#). During a meeting in Brussels, the prime ministers of EU member states, while initiating talks with Ukraine and Moldova, stipulated that negotiations with Bosnia would commence „once certain criteria are met.” Simultaneously, EU authorities conferred candidate status upon Georgia. This reflects the fact that [Bosnia has made only limited progress, fulfilling just two out of the 14 conditions set by Brussels](#).

A meeting between the leaders of nearly all parliamentary political parties in North Macedonia on Monday in Skopje finally agreed dates for the next elections. The first round of [presidential elections will take place on April 24 and, two weeks later, on May 8](#), parliamentary elections will be held in parallel with the presidential run-off. This news comes after the [strategic priorities plan prepared by the Government for the years 2024-2028](#) was published in the Official Gazette. The main focus is highlighted as strengthening relations with influential EU countries and taking appropriate steps towards an EU integration.

## Recommendations



For more insights regarding Russia's invasion in Ukraine and its future development, New Strategy Center recommends the following [Politico interview with Fiona Hill](#), former Senior Director for Europe and Russia of the National Security Council (2017-2019). Below are some points made in the article:

- Two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the conflict has reached a stalemate. U.S. aid has been crucial for Ukraine, but there is debate in the U.S. about the duration of this support.
- Hill, an expert on Russia and U.S. politics, emphasizes that the outcome of the Ukraine conflict is crucial for the U.S. and global order. She argues that the U.S. Congress's decision on continued aid to Ukraine is also a decision about America's future.
- A Russian victory would diminish U.S. global standing, embolden Iran and North Korea, strengthen China in the Indo-Pacific, destabilize the Middle East, and potentially trigger nuclear proliferation.
- Militarily, Ukraine has held off Russia better than expected but faces challenges in maintaining momentum without continued external support. Financially, international support remains strong, but political support is wavering due to domestic politics in supporting countries, including the U.S.



- Hill criticizes the high levels of partisanship in the U.S., which she believes undermines Ukraine's prospects and promotes global authoritarianism. She notes a reluctance among some U.S. politicians to support Ukraine, fearing it might politically benefit President Biden.
- Putin sees the conflict as a proxy war against the U.S. and aims to diminish U.S. influence. He's relying on unconventional allies like Iran and North Korea for military support and is exploiting divisions within the U.S. and its allies.
- Putin aims to partition Ukraine and weaken U.S. global leadership. He's trying to manipulate international attention towards other conflicts, like in the Middle East, to pressure Ukraine into unfavorable negotiations.
- The U.S. faces a critical decision: continuing support for Ukraine could strengthen global stability and U.S. leadership, while withdrawing could lead to international instability and diminished U.S. influence.
- The conflict's outcome will impact global security dynamics, including in the Indo-Pacific region and in terms of nuclear proliferation.