



MAIN TAKEAWAY of the month

In April, Russia continued its strategic bombing campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, resulting in the notable destruction of the Trypillia Thermal Power Plant. Additionally, the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant faced direct strikes, raising concerns about nuclear safety. Consequently, Russian troops have been trying to advance on multiple fronts, with Ukrainian forces fiercely defending key positions, notably near Chasiv Yar, where concerns are rising that Russian forces aim to seize control before Victory Day celebrations. Ukraine intensified its defense and mobilization efforts with a \$340 million allocation for fortification in key regions and the signing of a mobilization bill into law. The most significant aid this month came from the US, with the signing of the \$61 billion aid package into law, after months of Republican opposition.

In Russia, politically, the arrest of Timur Ivanov, Deputy Minister of Defense, on corruption charges, raised speculation about potential motives such as suspicions of treason, with implications for Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's position and power dynamics within Putin's inner circle. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Economy presented economic scenarios projecting GDP growth and inflation until 2027. However, western sources showed drone strikes on Russia's oil refineries significantly disrupting the economy, leading to a sharp decline in exports of diesel. Western sanctions further impacted Russian companies, while trade disruptions with China and Turkey have been registered as well.

In the Republic of Moldova, the Foreign Minister, Mihai Popshoi, highlighted the country's security challenges, emphasizing the impacts of the Ukraine conflict, the Transnistrian dispute, and Russia's propaganda efforts. Recent events included a kamikaze drone incident in Transnistria targeting a military base's radar station, escalating tensions. Separatist leaders threatened severe consequences, such as the possibility of world war and calls for Russian military assistance, in response to potential efforts by Chisinau to reintegrate the region or reunite with Romania. Additionally, fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor's formation of the electoral group "Pobeda/Victoria" in Moscow consolidated pro-Russian factions in Moldova. Despite these tensions, Moldova demonstrated a Western orientation by participating in joint drills with allies, indicating intentions to strengthen ties with the US and receive military assistance from the EU and defensive support from France.

Recent developments in the Balkans highlight judicial challenges, election preparations, and bilateral projects with international partners. Montenegro grapples with telecom violations and corruption allegations, while Kosovo and Serbia face legal proceedings related to wartime crimes. Bulgarian elections prompt reactions to interim Prime Minister Glavchev's cabinet lineup, Croatia sees the ruling HDZ seeking a third term, and Serbia schedules repeat elections for Belgrade. Bilaterally, Hungary collaborates on energy projects with Bosnia, Montenegro plans an LNG Terminal, and Serbia integrates electricity exchanges. Serbia rejects a mining permit extension for a Chinese company, while Kosovo moves closer to joining the Council of Europe, much to Serbia's dismay.

This month, the Ukraine war's frontline witnessed heightened conflict and a series of significant events. Russian strategic bombing continued, damaging [critical infrastructure](#), notably in the [Kharkov region](#). [Kyiv](#), [Kherson](#), [Zaporizhzhia](#), [Odessa](#), and [Lviv](#) regions were targeted as well, causing significant damage, including the destruction of the [Trypillia Thermal Power Plant](#). Moreover, the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant faced [direct strikes](#), raising [concerns](#) about the integrity of the [reactor's containment system](#), with both sides blaming each other for the attacks. In response, Ukraine's military intelligence agency conducted strategic operations, including the [demolition of an electricity substation](#) in Sevastopol, Crimea, and an [oil pipeline near Azov](#), Russia. Ukrainian forces also executed a drone strike on April 5, [targeting military airfields](#) such as [Yeysk](#), [Engels-2](#), and [Kursk](#), resulting in the [destruction of several military aircraft](#).

Despite [material and personnel losses](#), Russian forces intensified offensive operations, particularly in areas like [Dnipro](#), [Kharkiv](#), and [Donetsk](#), leading to casualties and further damage. Additionally, Russian troops continued [conducting campaigns](#) of [illegal chemical attacks](#) against Ukrainian soldiers. Russian assaults extended to areas like [Mykolaiv](#) and [Slovyansk](#) in Donetsk, where missile strikes damaged infrastructure. As a result, [compulsory evacuation orders](#) were extended to [many frontline settlements](#). Ukrainian intelligence targeted a [factory in Tatarstan](#) allegedly involved in manufacturing [Russian aircraft](#). Consequently, Russian troops have been trying to [advance on multiple fronts](#), with particular activity on the [Bakhmut and Novopavlivka fronts](#). Ukrainian forces responded by fortifying strategic locations but [especially in Chasiv Yar](#), amidst heightened concerns that Russian troops are aiming to [take control before Victory Day](#) celebrations and could then [advance into the Ukrainian-controlled areas in the Donetsk region](#). President Zelensky urgently appealed for international support, [stressing allies' crucial role](#) in Ukraine's defense.

At the end of the month, a significant highlight was Ukrainian anti-aircraft units achieving a milestone by successfully [downing a Russian Tu-22M3 bomber](#), which subsequently crashed in Russia's Stavropol Krai. In addition, Russian forces attacked [Dnipro](#), [Kharkov](#), [Nikopol](#), [Donetsk](#) and [Smolensk](#) and [Lipetsk](#) regions, where they targeted both civil infrastructure and [energy and fuel facilities](#), sparking [fires](#) and evacuations. Concurrently, Ukrainian forces are fiercely [defending key positions](#), notably near Chasiv Yar settlements surrounding them, where Russian [troops numbering 20,000 to 25,000](#) are situated, encountering resistance despite continuous attempts to advance.

Notably, Ukraine intensified its fortification efforts in response to escalating tensions and heightened threats from Russian aggression. The [government allocated](#) \$340 million to [enhance defense capabilities](#) in [key regions](#) like [Kharkiv](#), [Sumy](#), [Donetsk](#), [Herson](#), and [Mykolaiv](#). Moreover, funds were earmarked for the procurement of electronic warfare systems to [safeguard critical infrastructure](#) and [protect energy systems](#). Additionally, advancements in military technology were pursued, with the development and production of [upgraded naval drones](#) capable of long-range operations in the Black Sea. Efforts to localize arms production and [increase domestic drone manufacturing](#) underscored Ukraine's commitment to self-sufficiency in defense and the approval of agreements with neighboring countries to [enhance border security](#).

On April 16, President Volodymyr Zelensky [signed a pivotal mobilization bill into law](#), marking a significant development in Ukraine's [military regulations](#). The new legislation mandates that all men aged 18 to 60 register with Ukraine's military and carry their registration documents at all times. In a parallel move, the parliament voted to [eliminate demobilization provisions](#) from the bill, creating uncertainty regarding soldiers' service timelines. Moreover, the revised law introduces penalties for draft evasion, including the potential revocation of consular services and driver's licenses. In a bid to safeguard the rights of military personnel, additional measures have been implemented, such as the [establishment of a dedicated department](#) to address grievances and violations. Furthermore, substantial financial allocations have been earmarked, including an [additional payment scheme](#) for frontline personnel and [increased financial rewards and death compensations](#). As part of the broader overhaul of the country's mobilization rules, Ukraine has temporarily [suspended consular services](#).

In terms of military aid, notable contributions came from [The United Kingdom which promised its largest ever military package](#) of 500 million pounds, Denmark of [\\$313 million](#), and The Netherlands of [400 million euros](#). Several countries, including [Finland](#), [Norway](#), [Latvia](#), [Poland](#) and [Denmark](#), forged long-term security agreements with Ukraine, committing to provide ongoing military, political, financial, and humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, collaborative efforts were undertaken to bolster Ukraine's drone capabilities, with a [coalition initiative](#) led by the UK and [Latvia](#), including [Germany](#), [Canada](#), [the Netherlands](#), [Lithuania](#), Sweden, Estonia and Denmark, raising more than [\\$535 million](#).

When looking at humanitarian aid, various international partners committed to support the country's reconstruction efforts, economic development, and alleviation of the impact of the war. Among these countries were [Latvia](#), [The Netherlands](#), [Austria](#), [Denmark](#), [Switzerland](#) and [South Korea](#). In terms of collective efforts, The European Union approved a comprehensive reform and investment strategy for the next four years, [Ukraine Plan, worth €50 billion](#). In addition, the [European Investment Bank pledged €560 million](#) for various projects in Ukraine, spanning energy, infrastructure, housing reconstruction, and economic recovery.

On April 23, US President Joe Biden [signed into law an aid package](#) worth \$61 billion, providing military assistance to Ukraine, marking the [culmination of months of negotiations and debate](#) and block within the Republican House. Following this, the [first \\$1 billion](#) and second [\\$6 billion aid packages](#) were announced. The aid packages for Ukraine include various military resources like ammunition, vehicles, and missiles in order to enhance Ukraine's military capabilities. In addition to this, the bill includes the [REPO Act](#), a legislation aimed to empower the Biden administration to [seize \\$6 billion worth of Russian assets](#) currently held in U.S. banks and redirect these funds towards the reconstruction efforts in Ukraine.

In the last weeks, the US [covertly sent over 100 long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine](#), some of which were used to strike a Russian [military airfield in occupied Crimea](#) and to [target Russian troops in Berdyansk on the Sea of Azov](#). This was part of a \$300 million arms shipment in March. However, the [decision was kept secret](#) to avoid alerting the Russian troops.

RUSSIA - internal and external dynamics

In April, the domestic situation in Russia was influenced by the aftermath of the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack, with the Ministry of Internal Affairs [proposing stricter migrant entry controls](#). Measures include digital fingerprinting, shortening stays to 90 days, and requiring a "loyalty agreement". Talks of a [new agency for migration and interethnic policies](#) are ongoing. Law enforcement steps up actions against migrants, yet President [Putin advocates national unity](#), condemning xenophobia and Islamophobia, and praising Muslim groups for promoting harmony.

Signs of civil unrest appeared nonetheless, as residents of Orsk [protested against local authorities](#) for their perceived [corruption](#) and mismanagement, following a dam collapse and flooding in the Orenburg region. [Thousands of people have been evacuated](#) from their damaged houses due to this emergency situation, which triggered a [criminal investigation](#). With a potential change of government after Putin's inauguration on May 7, Governor Denis Pasler of Orenburg is expected to be dismissed.

Similar power shifts may be witnessed in Moscow as well. Timur Ivanov, Deputy Minister of Defense, [was arrested on charges of large-scale corruption](#), allegedly accepting bribes from companies contracted by the Ministry of Defense. Certain Russian publications speculate that the real reason behind Ivanov's arrest is [treason](#), while the corruption charges are merely a pretext for the media. Ivanov's arrest is seen as a warning to Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to improve ministry activities, [clearly impacting his position](#). This event may signal a shift in power dynamics within Putin's inner circle, potentially [bolstering the influence of security services](#).

Russia's move towards totalitarianism is showcased by recent political measures. [Russian institutions have restricted foreign travel for employees](#). This follows reports of [tighter travel](#)

[restrictions for officials](#), parliamentarians, and state agency employees. The move is driven by FSB concerns about potential detainment or extradition of officials and risks of information leaks.

Russian officials are considering establishing [a ministry for patriotic youth education](#), reflecting a trend toward militarization and indoctrination. Increased funds for patriotism promotion support the plan, with [the budget reaching 43.8 billion rubles](#) (~\$470 million USD) in 2023, nearly four times higher than 2022 and ten times higher than pre-war years. Also, it is already known that patriotic and military education [has gained significance in Russia's school curriculum](#) in recent years. Ultimately, the Ministry of Education ordered changes to include a new module in history lessons for grades 5-7, starting 2025. Topics will cover the "special military operation," combat heroes, and moral values like duty to the fatherland. Additionally, an [extensive drone training program](#) will be introduced in Russian schools.

Regarding Russia's military industry, it is of note that the Russian Ministry of Defense announced the establishment of [a center for unmanned aerial vehicles and robotic systems](#). Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu inspected progress in drone and armament technologies and confirmed [the deployment of S-500 Prometheus air defense](#) systems. Despite modernizing air defense equipment, Russia [prioritizes refurbishing old weaponry over modernization](#). In 2023, Russia allocated a significant portion of its GDP and government spending to the military, the highest since the Soviet Union's dissolution, according to [SIPRI](#). Meanwhile, Rostec, working with a tactical missile armament company, [is ramping up production](#) to boost the supply of high-precision aerial bombs.

In spite of these developments, President Vladimir Putin pointed out that [Russia has not transitioned to a war economy](#) but has merely "focused its efforts" on developing defense production, even though the economic growth (3.6%) was driven by [the needs of the defense industry](#). For example, the Prime Minister mentioned that in 2023 the production of vehicles and armored weapons has tripled, the production of weapons of destruction has increased sevenfold, and the production of communication equipment, electronic warfare, and reconnaissance has increased ninefold.

In the first quarter of 2024, [Russia's trade surplus increased](#) to \$22 billion, with a 10% decrease in imports and a 5% dip in exports compared to the same period in 2023. Despite this, there's a [slowdown in industrial production growth](#), down to 4% after earlier rises. The Russian Ministry of Economy [forecasts](#) a GDP growth of 2.8% for 2024, along with a 5.3% rise in income and 6.5% wage growth, though inflation may reach 5.1%. Oil export prices are estimated at \$65 per barrel, with a potential ruble depreciation to over 100 per dollar by 2025. In a [negative scenario](#), oil prices could drop to \$58.5 per barrel, with the ruble at 97 per dollar and inflation at 7%, potentially leading to GDP growth of only 1.5% in 2024 and risking recession in 2025. Drone strikes on major oil refineries resulted in a [25% collapse in foreign sales](#) of Russian diesel in April.

Western sanctions are increasingly impacting Russian companies, with aluminum producer Rusal, seeking urgent Russian government support. Without aid, [production could drop by a quarter](#). Also, Russian mining and metallurgical giant Norilsk [is closing its Norilsk copper plant](#), opting for a new one in China due to modernization challenges and sanctions pressure. Chinese banks have also [blocked payments for electronic components](#) since March, decreasing Chinese exports to Russia [by 15.7%](#) in March 2024, [with significant declines](#) in car and machinery shipments. Transaction issues also arose with [Turkish banks](#), resulting in an [18% decrease in imports](#) in March 2024 compared to March 2023. Despite these economic issues, Russia and China aim to enhance [cooperation between their intelligence services](#). Also, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [visit to China from the beginning of April](#) marks a preliminary step for Putin's meeting with Xi in [May](#).

Amid Western sanctions and Middle East disruptions, Russia plans to invest over \$25 billion to build [new transport routes to India and China](#) through Iran. This includes upgrading infrastructure and facilities along the Northern Sea Route to potentially reduce transit times by 30-50% compared to the Suez Canal while avoiding security issues in the Red Sea.

Meanwhile, Iran is preparing to launch a pilot program [allowing the use of Russian Mir bank cards](#) that serve as an alternative to Western payment systems, facilitating cross-border transactions

between the two countries. Additionally, the Iranian press reported [the delivery of Russian Su-35 fighter jets to Iran](#) at the end of April amid tensions in Iran-Israel relations. However, Iranian authorities officially denied any information regarding an imminent delivery of Su-35 aircraft.

Evolutions in the Republic of MOLDOVA

Recent events in the Republic of Moldova have been distinguished by three principal phenomena: territorial issues in Transnistria and Gagauzia, the war in Ukraine and the subsequent Russian meddling in Moldova's domestic affairs, and collaboration formats with the country's Western partners. These [were mirrored in the position of Moldova's Foreign Minister, Mihai Popshoi](#), who stated in Brussels that the major risks to Moldova's security are the war in Ukraine, the Transnistrian dispute, and Russia's propaganda war. A kamikaze drone in Transnistria [struck a military base's radar station without inflicting](#) any fatalities or serious damage. Additionally, the [military contingent of the Russian Federation's Joint Peacekeeping Forces \(JPKF\) in the region](#) performed training for "imitation repulsion of attacks on JPKF positions".

Politically, Vadim Krasnoselski, [the leader of the separatists in Tiraspol, threatened to start a global war](#) if the Republic of Moldova tried to reintegrate Transnistria into its borders, while Oleg Serebrian, [the deputy prime minister for reintegration, stated that it is difficult](#) to discuss a solution to the Transnistrian problem without peace in Ukraine. Economically, the Bashkan of Gagauzia, [Evgenia Gutsul, met with the President of Promsvyazbank, Petr Fradkov](#), to sign an agreement, most likely regarding [the bank's later decision to open accounts for socially vulnerable categories of population](#) in Gagauzia. The initiative was followed by massive requests for Mir credit cards by the population of the autonomous unit. These measures [will allow Gagauzia to escape Chisinau's economic blockade](#) and receive funding for social, infrastructure, and economic initiatives, with "payments set to begin on May 1". Politically, Evgenia Gutsul has threatened that the Gagauz Autonomy [will secede from Moldova in the event of a potential reunification with Romania](#), and has stated that [she does not rule out the possibility of Chisinau deploying troops](#) and dissolving Gagauz autonomy as a result, a situation in which the region would seek Russian support. To counter these narratives, President Maia Sandu [paid a visit to Comrat, the region's capital, where she met with mayors and representatives](#) of local public authorities from the largest cities of Gagauz Autonomy - Comrat, Ceadyr-Lunga, and Vulcanesti - where some local elected representatives from the region complained about being intimidated by Bashkan and People's Assembly deputies who support her.

At the same time, [pro-Russian parties suspected by authorities of being controlled by fugitive Ilan Shor met in Moscow](#), revealing their ties to this pro-Russian oligarch and announcing the formation of an electoral bloc known as "Pobeda" (Victory), which includes the Renaissance, Chance, Alternative Force, and Salvation of Moldova parties, in addition to Victory. In this context, the [police seized the equivalent of €1 million in cash](#) from Shor's supporters at the airport in Chisinau, on suspicion of "participating in an illegal financing scheme" ahead of the presidential election. Furthermore, [the Republic of Moldova's Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office has announced that](#) it has indicted the Bashkan of Gagauzia, Evgenia Gutsul, and a secretary of the Central Office of the former "Shor" Party, both accused of accepting funding from an organized criminal group for the party of fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, with the money coming from Russia.

Concerning its ties with Western partners, the [Republic of Moldova's Constitutional Court has approved the holding of a referendum](#) on the country's entrance to the European Union on October 20, the same day as the presidential elections. Citizens' views voiced in the referendum [will instantly become law](#). In the military domain, [while troops from Moldova, Romania, and the US conducted joint exercises JCET-2024](#) (Joint Combined Exchange Training) in Moldova from April 1-19, [the US intends to deepen cooperation with the Moldovan government](#) in the face of potential Russian threats to its stability, [the EU aims to provide lethal military aid](#) to Moldova, and President Emmanuel Macron [also pushed for a European missile defense shield](#) to safeguard Moldova as well.

Recent developments in the Balkans have mostly focused on judicial difficulties affecting the region's countries, approaching elections and boycotts, as well as bilateral projects with other international partners. In Albania, [unknown culprits launched a huge cyber attack on the online media organization Citizens Channel](#), raising new concerns about media freedom and access to independent information. Furthermore, some [Albanian returnees from the UK suffer significant obstacles](#) throughout the process of returning after being deported, which is why Britain must ensure returnees' 'dignity, safety, and respectful treatment'. Similarly, [Albania's parliament rejected a Constitutional Court review of former foreign minister](#) Olta Xhaka's immunity, and [Fredi Beleri, an ethnic Greek, will run for the European Parliament from behind bars](#) after being arrested on suspicion of vote-buying shortly before Albanian local elections in May last year. Other judicially contentious incidents in the region include [violations of competition regulations by Montenegrin telecom companies](#), [arrests of law enforcement personnel](#) and [trade union leaders](#), and [justice-seeking initiatives](#) relating to events that occurred during the former Yugoslavia conflicts.

Concerning Bulgarian elections, [interim Prime Minister Dimitar Glavchev's planned cabinet lineup elicits strong reactions in parliament](#), as all parties prepare for general elections on June 9. In Croatia, [the ruling Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, sought a third straight mandate](#) in the April 17 elections, despite efforts by the President of the Republic, Zoran Milanovic, the informal leader of the opposition, to prevent it. However, these efforts were futile because the election resulted in a victory for the ruling HDZ, which may nonetheless [struggle to form a coalition](#) to secure a majority in Parliament. In Kosovo, the [Serb Party boycotted the second census since the proclamation of independence](#) from Serbia in 2008. In Serbia, [repeat elections for Belgrade are scheduled for June 2](#) after the opposition and ruling parties failed to reach an agreement on holding municipal elections on the same day as polls in the capital, but government and opposition officials were unable to agree on the circumstances for holding them.

In terms of bilateral ties, Hungarian Prime Minister [Viktor Orban was awarded the Order of Republika Srpska](#) during his visit to Bosnia, and the Hungarian delegation [agreed to collaborate on energy projects worth 140 million euros](#) with Bosnia's Serb entity. In terms of energy projects, [Montenegro has included LNG Terminal in its spatial plan](#), and the directors of Serbia, Hungary, and Slovenia's transmission systems, as well as the European Power Exchange EPEX Spot, [have signed an agreement to integrate the three electricity exchanges](#) under the Alpine-Adriatic Danube Power Exchange (ADEX Group). Aside from that, [Serbia's Ministry of Mining and Energy denied a request from China's Serbia Zijin Mining company](#) for an extension of its permit to manage mining waste, while Kosovo [is getting closer to joining the Council of Europe after a vote](#) in the parliamentary assembly, much to Serbia's chagrin.

In the meantime...

➤ President Vladimir Putin's inauguration is set for May 7, which is expected to be followed by a [government reshuffle](#), a [visit to China](#), and an increase in pressure on the war front to [seize territories](#) in Ukraine, such as Chasiv Yar, before Victory Day on May 9.

➤ Türkiye is negotiating with ExxonMobil for a multi-billion-dollar [LNG deal to expand its energy portfolio](#). Due to Türkiye's Dortyol oil terminal in the Mediterranean suspending business with Russia amid escalating pressure from U.S. sanctions, Türkiye seeks to diversify its energy sources.

➤ Switzerland is set to [host a conference for peace in Ukraine](#) in mid-June which will be attended by Ukraine and up to 100 other countries. The conference aims to provide a platform for a high-level dialogue on ways to reach a comprehensive, just and lasting peace for Ukraine based on international law and the UN Charter.