

Ukraine

CONFLICT UPDATE

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team
February 21

Russia recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) and is deploying troops to Donetsk and Luhansk the night of February 21, 2022. ISW published its [assessment of Russia’s likely immediate course of action](#) at 3:30pm Eastern Time. Russian armed forces will likely attack Ukrainian forces at the line of contact to secure the portions of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts not currently under DNR/LNR control, likely accompanied by an air/missile campaign against unoccupied Ukraine in the coming days. We assess that Russia will likely take a phased approach rather than immediately beginning with the full-scale invasion.

This daily synthetic product covers key events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine and will replace ISW’s previous [“Indicators and Thresholds for Russian Military Operations in Ukraine and/or Belarus,”](#) which we maintained from November 12, 2021, through February 17, 2022. That document is no longer updated.

Key Takeaways February 21

- **Russian troops began overtly deploying to occupied Donbas following Putin’s recognition of the independence of Russia’s proxy Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics.**
- **Putin gave a maximalist speech denying Ukrainian sovereignty and its right to exist as an independent state, justifying further Russian offensive action and indicating the Kremlin is unlikely to stop in Donbas.**
- **The White House and Western states did not recognize Russia’s overt deployment of troops into Ukraine as an “invasion” but condemned Putin’s recognition of the DNR and LNR and announced limited sanctions.**
- **The Russian government falsely accused Ukrainian forces of attacking Russian territory for the first time in the current crisis, setting conditions for Russia to legitimize further military action against Ukraine.**
- **The United States warned the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights of a Russian “kill list” of politicians and likely future dissidents for Russia to target during a Russian occupation of Ukraine.**

Key Events February 20, 2pm EST – February 21, 5pm EST

Military Events

Russia began deploying troops to Donbas, likely from the 8th Combined Arms Army, following Russian President Vladimir Putin's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) on February 21. Independent Russian news wire *Interfax* reported that DNR residents observed two unidentified armored-vehicle columns moving in DNR during the early morning of February 22.¹ Social media users in the DNR claimed they observed Russian forces entering Donetsk during the evening of February 21-22.² Online traffic monitoring data showed that traffic slowed in Ivanovo-Yasinovka, Rostov Oblast, (approximately 10 kilometers from the Russian-Ukrainian border) in the evening on February 21.³ Russian forces deploying into Donbas may have created this additional traffic.

Unspecified elements of Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces (nuclear weapons) continued conducting readiness training and exercises on February 20.⁴ Servicemen trained on mobile ground missile systems and practiced operating communication systems at the Kapustin Yar Training Ground and two other training centers in Pereslavl-Zalessky, Yaroslavl Oblast, and Ostrov, Pskov Oblast. Additional unspecified elements of the Strategic Rocket Forces conducted unspecified combat training with simulators.

Russian forces near Ukraine, including the 4th Tank Division, continued to deploy to staging grounds on the Ukrainian border on February 20 and 21.⁵ Satellite imagery observed Russian forces at the Soloti storage camp in Belgorod redeploy south to the Ukrainian border on February 20.⁶ Russian social media users observed a likely battalion tactical group of the 4th Tank Division equipped with T-80U tanks redeploying to an unknown location from Belgorod, Russia.⁷ Satellite images observed a new Russian mobile field hospital in Shebekino, Belgorod Oblast, Russia, (approximately 5 kilometers from the Russian-Ukrainian border) on February 20.⁸ Satellite imagery also observed Russian helicopters in Belgorod for the first time on February 21.⁹ Russian social media users observed a prefabricated modular bridge that could support Russian river crossings in Ukraine in transit through Crimea on February 21.¹⁰ Unspecified Russian Southern Military District elements conducted river crossing exercises at the Prudboy Training Ground in Volgograd on February 20.¹¹

Chechen Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) forces deployed to southern Belarus, 30km from the Ukrainian border, on February 21.¹² Belarusian social media users observed Russian National Guard elements from Chechnya in Yelsk, Belarus, for the first time on February 21. The Kremlin may intend to use Rosgvardia forces as an occupation force in Ukraine.

Russian Activity

Russian President Vladimir Putin formally recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) and signed mutual cooperation treaties stipulating the deployment of Russian forces to Donbas following speeches attempting to justify Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 21.¹³ The Kremlin decreed that Russian troops will deploy to carry out "peacekeeping functions" in the DNR and LNR and that Russia will formally establish diplomatic relations and implement treaties of "friendship, cooperation and mutual Assistance" with the DNR and LNR.¹⁴ The Kremlin's decision to recognize the DNR and LNR is a major strategic shift in the Kremlin's approach to the war in Donbas and marks the Kremlin's official departure from supporting the Minsk II Agreements—the legal basis of all ceasefires since 2015 and the basis that preserved Ukraine's territorial integrity in Donbas. The Kremlin will overtly deploy military forces to Donbas and conduct overt military operations against Ukraine as ISW forecasted.¹⁵

Kremlin media aired a prerecorded Russian Security Council meeting the morning of February 21 to justify recognizing the DNR and LNR. Each member of the Security Council stated justifications for recognizing the DNR and LNR. Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Kremlin Representative on Ukraine Dmitry Kozak all stated Ukraine never intended to implement and has abandoned the Minsk II Accords, with Lavrov adding the West will not force Ukraine to comply with the Minsk II Accords. Putin and Lavrov reiterated that NATO has refused to respond favorably to the Kremlin's security demands on limiting NATO expansion. Kozak stated neither Ukraine nor the West “need” the Russian-occupied territory in Donbas and that Kyiv has a political interest in keeping the war in Donbas a frozen conflict. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed intensifying Ukrainian attacks against the DNR and LNR created a humanitarian catastrophe, claiming that 90 percent of Donetsk residents have no water. Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev argued the Kremlin should recognize the DNR and LNR despite the cost of Western sanctions, citing the Kremlin’s recognition of its proxies in Georgia in 2008. Putin attempted to frame the preplanned speeches as an unplanned meeting, likely to generate the perception of Kremlin buy-in to the recognition of the DNR and LNR, forcing key figures in the Russian government to publicly support his pre-planned action.

Putin gave a speech prior to signing the decrees attacking the concept of Ukraine as a sovereign state, setting conditions for further Russian offensive action. Putin claimed Ukraine is an “integral part of [Russia’s] own history, culture, spiritual space” and was only created following the 1917 Russian Revolution. Putin claimed nationalists and oligarchic clans rule modern Ukraine and that the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution was a Western-backed coup. Putin claimed NATO can directly control Ukrainian forces to attack Russia and that NATO “cheated” its 1991 “promises” to not expand eastward. Putin claimed “Russia has done everything to preserve the territorial integrity of Ukraine” through the Minsk II Accords since 2015. Putin stated his decision to “immediately recognize the independence and sovereignty” of the DNR and LNR is “long overdue” and asked the Russian Federal Assembly to ratify the treaties “in the very near future,” which the Federal Assembly will likely do on February 22. Putin demanded that Ukraine immediately cease nonexistent hostilities against Donbas.

The Russian government falsely accused Ukrainian forces of attacking Russian territory in Rostov with artillery and ground forces on February 21 to legitimize further military action against Ukraine.¹⁶ Russia’s Southern Military District claimed it destroyed two Ukrainian infantry fighting vehicles and killed five Ukrainian militants that crossed the border into Russian territory in Mityakinskaya, Rostov Oblast, on February 21.¹⁷ The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) also claimed that Ukrainian artillery destroyed a Russian border checkpoint near Shcherbakovo, Rostov Oblast.¹⁸ FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov said that Russian forces captured one Ukrainian prisoner who participated in the attacks during the Russian Security Council meeting on February 21.¹⁹ Ukrainian government officials denied these falsely alleged attacks on February 21.²⁰ The Kremlin will likely use these falsely claimed attacks to justify Russian military operations against Ukraine.

The Kremlin amplified claims that Ukrainian aggression led to mass evacuations in the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) on February 21.²¹ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov accused the Ukrainian Armed Forces of initiating provocations, endangering civilian lives, and intensifying shelling.²² Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused the West of encouraging Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to denounce the Minsk II Accords and destroy Ukraine.²³ Zakharova added that US Embassy in Moscow launched a “real information terrorist attack” aimed at frightening Russians about terrorist attacks in public places along the Ukrainian border and in large Russian cities. Russia’s Ministry of Emergency Situations and Russian Security Service (FSB) claimed 61,000 evacuees have entered Russia as of February 21.²⁴ The Ministry announced that 43 regions can host up to 42,000 DNR and LNR evacuees. The Ministry claimed it has established about 400 temporary accommodation points and is developing an additional

149 points to accommodate up to 54,000 people. Russia's Cabinet of Ministers allocated five billion rubles in payments to DNR and LNR evacuees on February 21.²⁵ Russian Federation Council First Deputy Chairman Sergey Ryabukhin reiterated that financial aid to DNR and LNR residents will not negatively impact Russians residing within the Russian territory and will prevent the greater costs of a "humanitarian catastrophe."²⁶

Proxy Activity

The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) claimed that Ukraine intensified its aggression through increased shelling and bombings targeting infrastructure and government buildings on February 20-21.²⁷ The DNR and LNR most likely intensified their claims of Ukrainian aggression on February 20-21 to justify Russia's formal recognition of the LNR and DNR as independent states and subsequent Russian military movements into DNR and LNR-held territory on February 21. The LNR and DNR repeatedly claimed that Ukrainian special forces saboteurs attempted to bomb critical infrastructure, most notably the LNR Joint Center for Control and Coordination (JCCC) and DNR artillery rocket and artillery depots, coal mines, water stations, electricity suppliers, and schools.²⁸ The DNR also claimed that one Ukrainian soldier died while attempting to set up an explosive device at a Donetsk train station on February 21.²⁹ The DNR and LNR claimed that Ukrainian shelling killed two LNR civilians, one DNR soldier, and one DNR civilian.³⁰

Ukrainian Culture and Information Policy Minister Oleksandr Tkachenko said that Ukraine uncovered 10 fake reports of Ukraine-initiated aggression against the DNR and LNR on February 19-20 and reiterated that the Kremlin, DNR, and LNR are conducting a disinformation campaign to portray Ukraine as the aggressor in Donbas.³¹ CNN reported on February 21 that US forensic analysts said the metadata of the video portraying the February 11 alleged Ukrainian provocation in Donetsk shows the video was made three days before the claimed date of the event.³² DNR and LNR claims of Ukrainian aggression and provocations in Donbas are likely all coordinated and staged to falsely portray Ukraine as the aggressor in the rising conflict in Donbas.

Belarusian Activity

Belarusian Chief of the General Staff Viktor Gulevich reiterated that Russian forces deployed in Belarus will only leave Belarus and return to their bases in Russia "when there is an objective need" and demanded the United States and NATO states withdraw troops from near Belarusian borders on February 21.³³ Gulevich also demanded that NATO let Belarus control NATO's withdrawal through unspecified "verification measures." Gulevich said that NATO's eastern expansion is "aggressive and unjustified" and only increases the likelihood of armed conflict in Eastern Europe. Gulevich reiterated that Western military pressure against the Union State and "aggravation of the situation in Donbas" influenced the decision for Russian forces to remain in Belarus indefinitely.

Ukrainian Activity

N/A

US Activity

US officials condemned Russia's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) on February 21 but stated Russia's overt deployment of forces to Donbas is not a new step, declining to state what the White House would consider a

Russian “invasion” of Ukraine. US President Joe Biden signed an executive order to impose sanctions against investments, imports, and exports to the DNR and LNR.³⁴ The White House emphasized that these sanctions—which are largely symbolic, as the United States has little to no trade with Russia’s proxies—are separate from sanctions it is prepared to impose in response to a further Russian invasion of Ukraine. US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan stated on February 21 that a Russian invasion of Ukraine could begin “in the coming hours or days” and would be “extremely violent.”³⁵ US Ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter condemned the Kremlin’s decision to recognize Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) and criticized the “forced mobilization” of military-age male citizens in those regions.³⁶ Several reporters quoted anonymous senior administration officials stating the White House does not view Russian forces operating overtly in Donbas as a new step triggering a US response.³⁷ Putin will likely phase further offensive operations against Ukraine in part to diffuse Western responses to his operations.

The *New York Times* reported on February 20 that the United States intercepted Kremlin orders for Russian military units to “proceed with an invasion of Ukraine” the week before US President Joe Biden’s speech on February 18, while CNN separately reported the United States has not yet seen several indicators of a large-scale invasion.³⁸ The *New York Times* additionally reported that US intelligence confirmed the Russian military has prepared to execute an unspecified attack plan and that 40-50 percent of units have shifted into combat formations. US intelligence officials separately told CNN that the United States still has not seen several “larger actions,” such as electronic jamming and cyberattacks, beyond previously seen tactical indicators.³⁹ The Kremlin will likely pursue a phased operation and continue its military buildup throughout the week, rather than launching an immediate full-scale invasion of unoccupied Ukraine.

US Representative to the UN Bathsheba Nell Crocker warned the UN of a Russian “kill list” of Ukrainians to target following a potential invasion on February 20.⁴⁰ Crocker claimed Russia has compiled a list of Ukrainians to kill or send to internment camps after invading Ukraine in a letter to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov denied the existence of the list on February 21. Crocker also warned that Russia will likely use lethal force to disperse potential Ukrainian protests or peaceful resistance to an occupation. *Foreign Policy* first reported on the US intelligence of a Russian “kill list” on February 18.⁴¹

US President Joe Biden agreed “in principle” on February 21 to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin unless Russia invades Ukraine, though it is unclear as of publication if the White House considers Putin’s recognition of the DNR and LNR an invasion.⁴² French President Emmanuel Macron proposed Putin meet with Biden in a phone call with Putin on February 20. The Kremlin did not commit to the meeting. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated that Russia cannot make concrete summit plans while “tensions rise.” Peskov suggested that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discuss plans for a summit during their planned February 24 meeting. The White House announced that any presidential meeting is contingent on Russia reducing its forces along the Ukrainian border. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba welcomed diplomatic talks with Russia but requested that the other permanent United Nations Security Council members, Ukraine, Germany, and Turkey be included in a meeting.⁴³

The US Embassy in Moscow warned of possible Russian false flag attacks on public centers around Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the Ukrainian border on February 21.⁴⁴ The US Embassy in Moscow warned individuals to avoid shopping centers, railway, and metro stations, and other public gathering locations. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated in an interview that Russia had not seen proof to support the US claim.

NATO and EU Activity

Several European leaders condemned the Kremlin’s decision to recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) as independent states and promised sanctions on Russia.⁴⁵ Western leaders including Macron, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, European Council President Charles Michel, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen condemned Putin’s decision to recognize the DNR and LNR as flagrantly violating the Minsk II Agreement on February 21.⁴⁶ Michel and Leyen called the recognition “illegal” and promised that the EU would impose sanctions against “those involved” in a joint statement. Putin informed Macron and Scholz separately over the phone that he planned to recognize the DNR and LNR prior to his public announcement, according to the Kremlin.⁴⁷

Putin likely seeks to drive a wedge between Western leaders and Ukraine by gradually increasing his aggression against Ukraine to introduce doubt into Western plans to impose sanctions in response to an “invasion.” Ukraine may perceive a lack of Western support if sanctions are not immediately imposed following the deployment of Russian “peacekeeping” forces into the DNR and LNR. No Western state has agreed to impose a planned package of “post-invasion” sanctions as of February 21. Leyen previously promised on February 20 that the EU would cut Russia off from international financial markets if it invades Ukraine.⁴⁸ EU Foreign Affairs Chief Josep Borell said on February 21 that the EU has a sanctions package—including export limitations in key industries, freezing assets of Kremlin-friendly individuals, and an import ban on Russian oil and gas—that the EU can implement gradually “depending on the level of [Russia’s] aggression.”⁴⁹ The EU also adopted a \$1.36 billion “emergency support package” to Ukraine to mitigate the crisis’s detrimental effects on financial and economic stability during a meeting on February 21.⁵⁰ During the meeting, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba urged the EU to grant Ukraine a pathway to EU membership to send Russia a political message.⁵¹

Other International Organization Activity

N/A

Individual Western Allies’ Activity

N/A

Other International Activity

N/A

¹ <https://www.interfax dot ru/world/823559>

² <https://twitter.com/COUPSURE/status/1495892324139900929>; <https://twitter.com/COUPSURE/status/1495883525299621890>; <https://twitter.com/COUPSURE/status/1495883525299621890>

³ https://twitter.com/HN_Schlottman/status/1495827531957735426

⁴ https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12409793@egNews; https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12409806@egNews

⁵ <https://twitter.com/JackDetsch/status/1495532423395913733>;
<https://twitter.com/COUPSURE/status/1495478536525824003>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/JackDetsch/status/1495532423395913733>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1495486244087812098>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/galandecZP/status/1495500695407144965>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/galandecZP/status/1495500695407144965>

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¹⁰ https://twitter.com/CITeam_en/status/1495723737836101640

¹¹ https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12409837@egNews;

¹² <https://twitter.com/TadeuszGicz/status/1495730470604189696>.

¹³ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/67828>; <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/67829>; <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/67825>; <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/67825>

¹⁴ <http://publication dot pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202202220001>; <http://publication dot pravo.gov dot ru/Document/View/0001202202220002>

¹⁵

<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine%20Invasion%20Forecast%20Series%20Part%201%20ISW%20CT%20December%202021.pdf>;

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¹⁶ <https://tvzvezda dot ru/news/2022211546-4ajml.html>; <https://ria dot ru/20220221/granitsa-1774091650.html>; <https://www.rbc dot ru/politics/21/02/2022/621389849a794724e81ee873>; <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/02/2022/621360d79a79470fcd422edd>

¹⁷ <https://tvzvezda.ru/ews/2022211546-4ajml dot html>; <https://ria.ru/ 20220221/granitsa-1774091650 dot html>; <https://www.rbc dot ru/politics/21/02/2022/621389849a794724e81ee873>; <https://www.rbc dot ru/politics/21/02/2022/621360d79a79470fcd422edd>

¹⁸ <https://www.rbc dot ru/politics/21/02/2022/621360d79a79470fcd422edd>

¹⁹ https://censor dot net/ru/news/3317694/rossiyane_zayavili_o_zahvate_v_plen_ukrainskogo_voennoslujaschego

²⁰ <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13782475>

²¹ <https://tass dot ru/politika/13780417>

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²⁴ <https://tass dot ru/obschestvo/13781503>

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²⁶ <https://tass dot ru/politika/13781921>

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<https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13782301>; <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13786799>; <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13785277>; <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13782541>

²⁹ <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13778677>

³⁰ <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13777583>; <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13778311>

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<https://www dot mil.gov.ua/news/2022/02/21/brifing-ministra-oboroni-oleksiya-reznikova-i-ministra-kulturi-ta-informacijnoi-politiki-oleksandra-tkachenko-v-ramkah-platformi-uarazom/>

³² https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-news-02-21-22/h_4a15381adeb222b25c85ebee16aae8a3

³³ <https://www.mil dot by/ru/news/144832/>

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³⁵ https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-news-02-21-22/h_a8811d359c81931d0fe2d993541fb16a

³⁶ <https://osce.usmission.gov/the-situation-in-and-around-ukraine-including-the-deteriorating-situation-in-eastern-ukraine/>

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<https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1495846176003866624?s=20&t=3m-buoLCD68Fhsa9OFwKqg>

⁴⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-macron-calls-emergency-national-security-meeting-russia-ukraine-2022-02-21/>

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⁴⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/21/ukraine-calls-for-urgent-eu-sanctions-on-russia-to-avert-invasion>

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