

Over \$8 bn of Russian central bank assets held in Switzerland

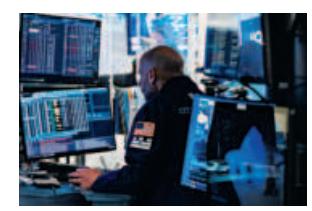
AFP, Geneva

The value of Russian assets frozen in Switzerland since the start of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has risen by nearly \$2 billion in the past year to over \$8 billion, the government said Tuesday.

Traditionally neutral Switzerland decided four days after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, to align itself with the neighbouring European Union's sanctions against Moscow, obliging banks to pass on information on clients or firms targeted.

As of March 31, the Russian assets frozen in the wealthy Alpine nation were valued at 7.4 billion francs (\$8.4 billion), the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) said.

That represents a hike of 1.6 billion francs (\$1.8 billion) compared to a year ago, it said, adding that the increase was due to the fact that additional assets had been identified and frozen.



In addition, "14 real estate assets belonging to individuals, companies, or entities subject to sanctions" have been identified, it said.

Sports and luxury cars, aircraft, artworks, furniture, and instruments belonging to individuals, companies, or entities subject to sanctions also remain frozen in Switzerland, it added.

The sanctions against Russia also include several measures in the financial, trade and energy sectors, as well as various restrictions in the services and air transport sectors.

SECO stressed that the sanctions imposed by Switzerland were "identical" to those imposed by the EU.

Last week, European countries agreed at a summit in Paris to ramp up sanctions on Russia.

A bipartisan group of US senators has proposed legislation that would slap sanctions on countries friendly to Russia if Moscow disrupts ongoing negotiations to end the Ukraine war.

US President Donald Trump is trying to broker a ceasefire between Ukraine and its Russian invader, but his administration has failed to reach a breakthrough despite talks with both sides.



Smoke billows on the horizon east of the Bureij camp for Palestinian refugees in the central Gaza Strip following Israeli bombardment yesterday. Israel's defence minister has announced a major expansion of military operations in the Hamas-run Gaza, saying the army would seize "large areas" of the Palestinian territory.

PHOTO: AFP

BREACHES OF ENERGY CEASEFIRE Russia, Ukraine trade new accusations

No plans for Putin-Trump meeting in KSA: Kremlin

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia and Ukraine yesterday accused each other of launching new attacks against each other's energy facilities, in violation of a US brokered moratorium.

Both sides said they were providing details of the alleged violations to the United States, which got Moscow and Kyiv to agree the limited truce last month as a hoped-for stepping stone towards a full ceasefire.

Russia's defence ministry said Ukraine had conducted drone and shelling attacks in the western Kursk region that cut off power to over 1,500 households.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said a Russian drone hit an energy substation in Sumy region and artillery fire damaged a power line in Dniproptrovsk, cutting off electricity to nearly 4,000 consumers. The administration of US President Donald Trump is impatient with both sides to move faster towards ending the three-year war.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the fact that President Vladimir Putin had agreed the energy truce was evidence he was serious about engaging in a peace process - something that Kyiv and some of its European allies dispute.

Peskov said that Moscow would keep working with the Americans despite what he called daily Ukrainian strikes on Russian energy infrastructure.

Zelensky said on Tuesday that



Russia was breaking the energy truce and called on the US to boost sanctions against Moscow, as Trump has threatened to do, reports Reuters.

Ukraine said last month it was willing to accept a full 30 day ceasefire but Putin declined to agree to that, raising a series of questions about how it would be monitored and concerns that Ukraine would use the breathing space to mobilise more soldiers and acquire more weapons from the West.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin yesterday said that President Vladimir Putin has no plans to visit Saudi Arabia, where US leader Donald Trump is due in the coming weeks, dismissing speculation the pair could meet there.

Trump and Putin have held two known phone calls since February but have not met in person, while their officials have held talks in Riyadh. Trump on Monday said that he could visit Saudi Arabia as early as next month, reports AFP.

"These are purely the plans of the US head of state, in no way related to Putin," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a daily briefing with reporters.

"Putin, so far, has no plans like that," he added, saying that there was no concrete date or place for a "possible meeting" between Putin and Trump.

Trump is pushing for an end to the conflict in Ukraine, but has recently expressed anger at both Putin and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky, with little progress made.

US airstrikes in Yemen kill 4 people

Say Houthi rebels

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's Houthi rebels said yesterday that overnight air strikes on Hodeida province killed four people in an attack they blamed on the United States.

"The casualty toll of the American aggression targeting the Water Management building in... Hodeida governorate... rose to four martyrs and three wounded," said Houthi health ministry spokesman Anees Alasbahi, updating an earlier toll of three dead.

Houthi media had reported US strikes on areas controlled by the Iran-backed rebels, including water infrastructure in Hodeida and three strikes in Hajjah.

Strikes also hit the group's northern stronghold of Saada. The US has not confirmed it carried out these strikes.

But US President Donald Trump has vowed that attacks on Yemen's Houthis would continue until they are no longer a threat to shipping.

Early yesterday, Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said the group targeted US aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman for "the third time in 24 hours".

His statement came just as Washington said it was increasing the number of aircraft carriers deployed in the Middle East to two.

ANTI-GOVT PROTESTS Turkey fines Meta for refusing to suspend accounts

AFP, Washington

Facebook parent Meta on Tuesday said it was fined a "substantial amount" in Turkey for failing to comply with government orders to suspend accounts linked to widespread protests following the detention of the opposition mayor of Istanbul. "We believe freedom of expression is a fundamental right and that our platforms should be a place where users around the world can exercise this right," a Meta spokesperson said in a statement.

"Government requests to restrict speech online alongside threats to shut down online services are severe and have a chilling effect on people's ability to express themselves," it added.

Meta declined to give the exact amount of the fine.

Elon Musk-owned X has also received orders to suspend hundreds of accounts, which the company has largely complied with as it fights the demands in courts.

According to Politico, most of the X accounts belonged to university-linked activists sharing protest information and were suspended in Turkey only.

Since March 19, Turkey has been gripped by massive anti-government protests following the arrest of Istanbul's opposition mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, the biggest political rival of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

France's Le Pen eyes 2027 vote Says swift appeal 'good news'

AFP, Paris

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen said in an interview published yesterday that she would use all possible legal avenues to stand in 2027 elections despite a criminal conviction, hailing a promise to hear her appeal quickly as "very good news".

Le Pen told Le Parisien she would use "all avenues" of appeal to ensure she can stand, including France's Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) as well as the regular Paris court of appeal.

Le Pen was on Monday given a partly suspended jail term and a fine but, above all, an immediate ban from taking part in elections for five years after being convicted for a scheme at the EU parliament where assistants were actually working for her party.

If it stands, the conviction would eliminate Le Pen from the 2027 election. According to current polling she would easily win the first round and describes herself as the "favourite" to succeed Emmanuel Macron.

The news sparked shockwaves in France but also in certain quarters around the world, with the likes of President Donald Trump, his billionaire adviser Elon Musk and the Kremlin expressing concern.

The RN is also planning to hold a major protest on Sunday to protest against the verdict, with Le Pen saying she is innocent of all the charges.

But in a huge boost to Le Pen, the Paris appeals court said on Tuesday it would examine the case within a timeframe that could potentially allow her to contest the poll if her conviction is overturned or sentence changed.

US senator smashes record with 25-hr anti-Trump speech

AFP, Washington

A Democratic US lawmaker shattered a record for the longest speech in Senate history Tuesday, staying on his feet for more than 25 hours to deliver a fiery protest against President Donald Trump's "unconstitutional" actions.

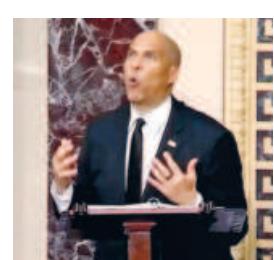
Senator Cory Booker's display of endurance -- to hold the floor he had to remain standing and could not even go to the bathroom -- recalled the famous scene in Frank Capra's 1939 film classic "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

The longest Senate speech on record before Tuesday was delivered by South Carolina's Strom Thurmond, who filibustered for 24 hours and 18 minutes against the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

Booker, only the fourth Black senator to be popularly elected to the body, blew past that deadline, his voice still strong but emotional as he topped out at 25 hours and five minutes.

"Strom Thurmond's record always... really irked me," he later told broadcaster MSNBC.

"That the longest speech on our great Senate floor was someone who was trying to stop people like me from being in the Senate."



A masked protester performs during a demonstration against impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in Seoul yesterday. South Korea's Constitutional Court is set to issue its long-awaited ruling on President Yoon's impeachment tomorrow, months after his suspension for declaring martial law.

Nobel-winning ex-president of Costa Rica loses US visa

AFP, San Jose

Former Costa Rican president and Nobel Peace laureate Oscar Arias said he was stripped of his US visa, prompting him to brand the country under Donald Trump an autocracy.

The two-time president won the Nobel in 1987 for his efforts to end civil wars in Central America.

The former president said he was notified via email on Tuesday morning of the cancellation of his tourist and business visa.

The reason was not fully clear, but Arias has been an outspoken critic of Trump's migrant deportation policies and tariff wars.

He has also criticised the current Costa Rican president, Rodrigo Chaves, who has close ties with the Trump administration and whom Arias accuses of taking orders from Washington.