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## UKRAINE CONFLICT UPDATES 2022

Dec 31, 2022 - [ISW Press](#)[Donate](#)

This page is a collection of ISW and CTP's Ukraine War updates from 2022.

The list below also includes prominent warning alerts that ISW and CTP launched beyond our daily Ukraine Conflict Updates. These products addressed critical inflection points as they occurred.

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map complements the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW daily produces with high-fidelity and, where possible, street-level assessments of the war in Ukraine.

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive timeline of the invasion. *This high-definition interactive map is resource intensive. The performance and speed of the map correlate with the strength of your hardware.*

[Click here](#) to read about the methodology behind ISW and CTP's mapping of this conflict.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 31

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, Madison Williams, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 31 7:45pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

*Note: ISW and CTP will not publish a campaign assessment (or maps) tomorrow, January 1, in observance of the New Year's Holiday. Coverage will resume on Monday, January 2.*

Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual New Year's Eve address continued to illustrate that Putin is uncertain of his ability to shape the Russian information space and remains focused on justifying the war and its costs to his people. Putin stated that "Russia's sovereign, independent, and secure future depends only on us, on our strength and determination" and that 2022 "was a year of difficult, necessary decisions, of important steps toward achieving the full sovereignty of Russia and the powerful consolidation of our society."<sup>[1]</sup> He added that the events of 2022 "became the milestone that laid the foundation of our new common future, our new true independence." He continued: "That is what we are fighting for even today, we are defending our people on our own historical territories in the new Russian Federation Subjects [the illegally annexed territories of

**Ukraine].**" This speech continued Putin's rhetorical claims not only that Russia has historical rights to Ukraine, but also that Russia's independence and sovereignty depend on regaining control of Ukraine. Putin thereby attempts to cast victory in the war as essential to Russia's continued existence as an independent state.

These comments were likely meant in part to justify the costly war and to appeal to the ultra-nationalist pro-war community that routinely cites the defense of illegally annexed territories as reason to pursue even more aggressive goals and to pay even higher prices for them in Ukraine.<sup>[2]</sup> They also indicate, however, that Putin remains unwilling to contemplate a meaningful peaceful resolution of the war he began other than on terms he dictates to Ukraine and the West. Putin is unlikely to accept any lesser outcome unless Ukraine, with the help of its Western supporters, can inflict additional large-scale defeats on Russian forces and liberate considerably more of its occupied land.

Putin did not use his annual speech to make any announcements about how the Russian military intends to reverse its setbacks in Ukraine and achieve his maximalist goals. The banality of most of the speech is consistent with previous ISW assessments that Vladimir Putin may have postponed his annual address to the Russian Federation Assembly because he was uncertain of his ability to shape the Russian information space amidst increasing criticism of his conduct of the war.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Putin delivered his address from the headquarters of the Southern Military District (SMD) as part of an ongoing effort to portray himself as an effective wartime leader actively in control of the war effort.** Putin delivered his address from the Southern Military District in Rostov-on-Don with Russian military personnel in combat uniforms behind him.<sup>[4]</sup> Putin also reportedly presented battle banners to the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) 1st Army Corps and the Luhansk People's Republic 2nd Army Corps, as well as state awards to Russian servicemembers who participated in combat missions in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian sources reported that Putin also awarded the Cross of Saint George to the commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovkin.<sup>[6]</sup> Putin likely staged these events at the SMD headquarters to bolster Kremlin efforts to portray Putin as being deeply involved in the conduct of the war and an effective wartime leader.<sup>[7]</sup> The award to Surovkin signals Putin's continued support of the overall commander of the war despite the fact that Surovkin's tenure has not yet seen any significant territorial gains and the fact that the wide-scale deliberate attacks on Ukrainian critical infrastructure that Surovkin likely recommended and prepared have not brought Russia any closer to victory.

**Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu used his New Year's celebratory address to demonize Ukraine and to announce that Russian victory is as "inevitable" as the coming of the new year.** Shoigu falsely credited Russian soldiers with defending civilians suffering "genocide and violence" for "the right to speak Russian," which is an officially recognized national minority language in Ukraine. Shoigu further described the war as a struggle against neo-Nazism, terrorism, and those who idolize war criminals. Shoigu framed Russian victory as the way to prevent attempts to blot out Russia's "glorious history and great achievements" and to protect civilians freed from "Nazis" in an apparent attempt to motivate Russian soldiers.

**Russian forces are likely depleting their stocks of artillery ammunition and will struggle to support their current pace of operations in certain sectors of the frontline in Ukraine as a result.** Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov reported on December 31 that Russian forces in Ukraine are experiencing significant issues with artillery ammunition that will become more pronounced by March of 2023.<sup>[8]</sup> Budanov stated that Russian forces had previously used 60,000 artillery shells per day (as of some unspecified date) and now only use 19,000 to 20,000 shells.<sup>[9]</sup> Budanov stated that Russian forces have also removed all remaining artillery ammunition from Belarusian military warehouses to support their operations in Ukraine.<sup>[10]</sup> The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on December 24 that Russian forces currently lack the necessary stockpile of artillery munitions to support large-scale offensive operations and that sustaining defensive operations along the lengthy frontline in Ukraine requires the Russian military to expend a significant number of shells and rockets daily.<sup>[11]</sup> ISW assesses the constraints on munitions will likely in part prevent Russian forces from maintaining a high pace of operations in the Bakhmut area in the near term.<sup>[12]</sup> The depletion of the Russian military's artillery ammunition stocks will likely impact their ability to conduct a high pace of operations elsewhere in Ukraine as well. This Ukrainian report that the Russians have already depleted ammunition stockpiles in Belarus is a further indicator that a renewed large-scale Russian offensive from Belarus in the coming months is unlikely.

**Russian forces launched another round of missile strikes targeting Ukrainian critical infrastructure on December 31, but this round was of reduced intensity compared to previous rounds.**<sup>[13]</sup> Official Ukrainian sources stated that Russian forces launched over 20 air-launched cruise missiles (of which Ukrainian air defenses reportedly shot down 12) and used 10 Shahed-136 drones and an Orlan-10 surveillance drone (all of which Ukrainian forces reportedly downed).<sup>[14]</sup> ISW

cannot assess at this time whether the decreased intensity of this barrage resulted from Russian missile shortages or whether Russia can continue to conduct intense waves of strikes. Russian milbloggers continued to describe the scope of the attack using similar reporting and reactions as they used for previous rounds of missile strikes despite the reduced intensity and impact. [15]

**Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Ukraine and Russia exchanged prisoners on December 31, but reports differed on the number of prisoners exchanged.** A senior aide to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Andriy Yermak, posted that 140 Ukrainian soldiers returned to Ukraine and an unspecified number of Russian soldiers returned to Russia.[16] Several Russian sources claimed that 82 Ukrainian soldiers returned to Ukraine and 82 Russian soldiers returned to Russia.[17]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual New Year's Eve address continued to illustrate that Putin is uncertain of his ability to shape the Russian information space and remains focused on justifying the war in Ukraine and its cost to his domestic audience.
- Putin delivered his address from the headquarters of the Southern Military District (SMD) as part of his ongoing efforts to portray himself as an effective wartime leader.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu demonized Ukraine and announced that Russian victory is inevitable in his New Year's Eve speech.
- Russian forces are likely depleting their stocks of artillery ammunition and will struggle to support their current pace of operations in Ukraine as a result.
- Russian forces launched another round of missile strikes targeting Ukrainian critical infrastructure but at a reduced intensity compared to previously massive waves of strikes.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Ukraine and Russia exchanged prisoners but differed in their reporting on the number of exchanged personnel.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kremenna line on December 31.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City on December 31.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) lost connection to its last functioning backup power line on the evening of December 29.
- Russian forces continue operations in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast and along the southern axis.
- Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated on December 31 that he knew "for a fact" that the Kremlin plans to close its borders for men, declare martial law, and begin another wave of mobilization in "one week or so."
- Russian occupation authorities continue to intensify law enforcement crackdowns in occupied territories in response to Ukrainian partisan activities.
- Russian occupation officials continue to create unbearable living conditions for residents of occupied territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Madison Williams, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 30, 5:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces targeted Kyiv using Iranian-made drones on the night of December 29 to 30, a continuation of an increased pace of drone attacks in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Air Force Command stated that Russian forces launched 16 Shahed-131 and -136 drones at targets in Ukraine on the night of December 29 to 30 and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all of them.[1] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched seven of the drones at targets in Kyiv and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all of them, but one of the drones' munitions hit an administrative building.[2] The Russian drone attacks follow a massive series of Russian missile and drone strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure on December 29 during which Russian forces launched 23 drones, the majority of

which were Shaheds.[3] The Russian military's use of 39 drones in the past two days, its use of 30 Shahed 131 and -136 drones on the night of December 18 and 19, and its use of 13 Shahed drones on December 14 represent a significant increase in its recent use of these systems in Ukraine.[4] ISW assessed on December 10 that an increased pace of Russian drone attacks may indicate that Russian forces accumulated more Iranian-made drones after a three-week period (November 17 to December 7) of not using them or that Russia received or expected to receive a new shipment of drones from Iran.[5] Russian forces have likely further increased their pace of drone attacks in an effort to sustain their campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure given their likely depleted stock of precision missiles.[6] Ukrainian air defenses have recently proven to be highly effective at shooting down Shahed drones and the Russian military's use of these systems in attacks against civilian targets in rear areas is having diminishing impacts.[7] The Russian military will likely continue to commit an increased number of these systems to attacks on civilian targets in Ukraine in its misguided attempt to break the Ukrainian will to fight.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin opened the door for further institutionalized corruption through the manipulation of the Russian domestic legal sphere.** Putin approved a decree on December 29 that exempts all Russian officials, including members of the military and law enforcement services, from the requirement to make income declarations public.[8] The decree extends to military officials, employees of Russian internal affairs organs, those serving in Rosgvardia and law enforcement positions, employees of the Russian penitentiary system and Investigative System, and individuals seconded to positions in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts.[9] The decree also notably lifts the ban on military officials receiving "charitable" gifts in connection with their participation in hostilities in Ukraine.[10] Russian independent newspaper *The Insider* noted that this decree could theoretically allow Russian officials involved in the war to seize the private property of Ukrainian residents of occupied areas because such property could be legally classed as "charitable gifts." [11] ISW continues to report on Putin's manipulations of domestic law to quash domestic opposition to the war and enable those who support it.[12]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces targeted Kyiv using Iranian-made drones on the night of December 29 to 30.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin opened the door for further institutionalized corruption in the Russian Federation.
- Russian forces continued to conduct counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian forces struck Russian concentration areas in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka area as well as in Bakhmut, where the pace of Russian offensive operations may have slowed compared to previous days.
- A Russian source claimed that Russian forces conducted ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources continued to discuss whether and when an imminent second wave of mobilization in Russia will occur.
- Russian officials continue to pursue the integration of occupied territories into the Russian Federation.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Angela Howard, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 29, 5:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted another massive series of missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure on December 29.** Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched 69 cruise missiles and 23 drones at Ukraine and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 54 of the missiles and at least 11 of the drones.[1] Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck targets, primarily infrastructure facilities, in Lviv, Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, and Donetsk oblasts causing widespread disruptions to energy, heating, and water supplies.[2] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces also struck targets in Sumy, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, Vinnytsia, Khmelnytsky, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, Poltava, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts.[3] The Belarusian Ministry of Defense claimed that Belarusian air defenses shot down a Ukrainian S-300 air defense missile during the wave of Russian

strikes and that wreckage fell onto Belarusian territory.[4] It is currently unclear whether Ukrainian air defenses may have been responding to Russian missile launches from Belarusian territory, which Russian forces have used repeatedly in support of their campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.[5]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) responded to ongoing Western assessments that it has severely depleted its stock of high-precision weapons systems amidst the massive strike against Ukraine by stating that it would never run out of Kalibr missiles.[6] ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have significantly depleted their arsenal of high-precision weapons systems but will likely continue to threaten Ukrainian critical infrastructure at scale in the near term and cause substantial suffering to Ukrainian civilians.[7] Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated on December 26 that Russian forces had enough missiles to conduct two or three more large-scale strikes.[8] ISW assesses that the Russian campaign to break the Ukrainian will to fight through large-scale missile strikes against critical infrastructure will fail even if the Russians are able to conduct more barrages than Budanov estimated.[9]

**Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated on December 29 Russia's unwillingness to commit to genuine negotiations and to recognize Ukraine as an independent actor in negotiations.** Lavrov stated in an interview with a prominent Russian news source that Russia will not accept Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's proposed peace plan and that the Kremlin will not talk to any Ukrainian negotiators under conditions that include the withdrawal of Russian troops from occupied Ukraine, Russian payment of reparations, and Russian participation in international tribunals. [10] Lavrov declared that he cannot determine whether an "adequate," independent politician remains in Kyiv with whom Russia can negotiate.[11] Lavrov claimed that Zelensky's refusal to pursue negotiations with Russia in April demonstrated the complete "lack of independence of [Zelensky] in making important decisions" and the manipulation of the West to continue hostilities.[12] Lavrov questioned whether an "acceptable" politician would emerge under the "Kyiv regime," apparently restating the Kremlin's position that Zelensky is not a legitimate political leader or acceptable negotiating partner and recommitting Russia to its maximalist goal to drive regime change in Ukraine. [13]

**Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated that fighting in Ukraine is in a deadlock on December 29.[14]** In an interview with BBC, Budanov stated that "the situation is just stuck" and that both Russian and Ukrainian troops lack the resources or ability to move forward.[15] Budanov stressed that Ukraine cannot defeat Russian troops "in all directions comprehensively" and reiterated that Ukraine is awaiting the supply of new and more advanced weapons systems.[16] Budanov's statement is consistent with certain elements of ISW's December 28 assessment, which suggested that the Russian offensive around Bakhmut may be culminating and that Russian forces in this area will likely be unable to make operationally significant gains. [17] However, ISW also noted indicators that Russian forces may be preparing for a decisive effort (likely of a defensive nature) in Luhansk Oblast, which suggests that fighting writ large in Ukraine has not necessarily reached a stalemate.[18]

**The Kremlin continues to manipulate Russian law to grant the state increasingly broad powers using vague language in order to eliminate dissent and threaten Ukrainian sympathizers.** Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a supplement to the Russian Criminal Code on December 29 that allows Russian authorities to sentence Russians to up to life imprisonment for "assistance to subversive activities" or for "undergoing training for the purpose of carrying out sabotage activities" and for "organizing a sabotage community" and between 5- and 10-years imprisonment for "participation in such a community." [19] Putin also signed a law enabling Russian authorities to sentence any private citizen who "desecrates" the ribbon of Saint George (a prominent Russian military symbol especially associated with the war in Ukraine) with up to 3 years imprisonment or a fine of up to three million rubles (40,541 USD). [20] These laws follow a sequence of Russian policies targeting what remains of the Russian opposition and enhancing Kremlin control of Russia's already-limited information space under the guise of preventing Russians from "discrediting" the military.[21]

**Repeated Ukrainian strikes on legitimate military targets far in the Russian rear demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Russian air defenses against drones.** Ukrainian forces attacked Engels Airbase with an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) on December 29, within three days of reports that air defense shot down a Ukrainian UAV over Engels and killed three Russian servicemen.[22] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on December 29 that it is "increasingly clear" that Russia "is struggling to counter air threats deep inside [its territory]."[23] The United Kingdom MoD assessed that Russian air defenses probably are struggling to meet the high demand for air defense for field headquarters near the front line in Ukraine while also protecting strategic sites, such as Engels Airbase.[24] **The repeated strikes on Engels Airbase will likely exacerbate milblogger critiques**

**that Russia cannot defend its own territory from Ukrainian strikes.** A prominent Russian milblogger questioned how Ukrainian UAVs and missiles cross such distances and enter Russian territory with “such impunity” and questioned the honesty of the Russian Ministry of Defense’s response.[25] The milblogger joked that an undetected pilot landing in Red Square (referencing Matias Rust’s 1987 flight from Helsinki to Moscow) would certainly generate a response longer than a single sentence from the Russian government.[26] ISW reported on similar dissatisfaction among Russian milbloggers on December 26.[27]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted another massive series of missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Russia’s unwillingness to commit to genuine negotiations with Ukraine.
- Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated that fighting in Ukraine is in a deadlock.
- The Kremlin continues to manipulate Russian law to grant the state increasingly broad powers under ambiguous conditions in order to eliminate dissent.
- Repeated Ukrainian strikes on legitimate military targets in rear areas in the Russian Federation demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Russian air defenses against drones and exacerbate critiques that Russia cannot defend its own territory.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Kremenna while Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka area as well as around Bakhmut, where the potential culmination of the Russian offensive is likely being expedited.
- Russian forces continued to conduct defensive operations in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin’s mobilization working group met for the first time on December 29. The forum for criticism of mobilization implementation will likely create friction with the Russian Ministry of Defense.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to intensify law enforcement crackdowns in unsuccessful attempts to stamp out partisan pressure in occupied territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

George Barros, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 28, 8:15pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian offensive against Bakhmut is likely culminating as ISW forecasted on December 27.[1] US military doctrine defines culmination as the “point at which a force no longer has the capability to continue its form of operations, offense or defense,” and “when a force cannot continue the attack and must assume a defensive posture or execute an operational pause.”[2] If Russian forces in Bakhmut have indeed culminated, they may nevertheless continue to attack aggressively. Culminated Russian forces may continue to conduct ineffective squad-sized assaults against Bakhmut, though these assaults would be very unlikely to make operationally significant gains.

Several indicators support the assessment that Russian forces around Bakhmut have culminated.

Senior Ukrainian officials are visiting frontline positions in Bakhmut unimpeded. Ukraine’s Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) chief, Kyrylo Budanov, visited Bakhmut on December 27-28 and was geolocated to within at least 600 meters of the previously recorded Russian forward line of troops. [3] Budanov’s visit supports previous Ukrainian social media reports that Ukrainian forces conducted a tactical counterattack that repelled Russian forces from the outskirts of Bakhmut on December 21. [4] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Bakhmut on December 20.[5]

Recent combat footage supports ISW’s previous assessment that Russian forces are operating in squad-sized assault groups due to combat losses.[6] Combat footage posted on December 26 shows Ukrainian fire defeating squad-sized groups of 5-10 unsupported Russian infantry attempting a disorderedly assault on Novoselivske in Luhansk Oblast.[7] This footage, while not from Bakhmut, is

consistent with a senior Ukrainian official's report that Russian forces in the Bakhmut area are no longer operating as company and battalion tactical groups but are instead operating in smaller groups of 10 to 15 servicemembers (squad-size organizations) as of December 27.[8]

Russian airborne forces (VDV) are reportedly augmenting Wagner Group operations around Bakhmut. A Russian source reported that Wagner and VDV elements conducted joint operations in Bakhmut on December 27.[9] The report, if true, marks an inflection given that the Wagner Group has been conducting information operations to assert that the Wagner Group forces exclusively are operating in Bakhmut.[10] The conventional Russian military supporting Wagner Group elements in Bakhmut—after Wagner took efforts to emphasize it exclusively is responsible for the Bakhmut sector—would be consistent with indicators for the Wagner Group forces' culmination. ISW has previously assessed that Wagner Group forces are serving a chiefly attritional role around Bakhmut and have therefore likely become degraded to a near-debilitating extent and need reinforcement from more conventional Russian elements.[11] High rates of attrition amongst the forces responsible for the offensive on Bakhmut may expedite the culmination unless notable numbers of regular Russian military units are sent to sustain the offensive and delay or avert its culmination.

**Russian forces appear to be preparing for a decisive effort in Luhansk Oblast, although it is unclear whether for defensive or offensive operations.** Russian forces continue accumulating equipment and forces in Luhansk. VDV elements that were likely previously operating in Kherson Oblast appear to have redeployed to Luhansk Oblast following the Russian withdrawal from west bank Kherson Oblast in November.[12] Social media images from late December increasingly show Russian equipment in transit in Luhansk Oblast.[13] Russian forces are operating military district-level thermobaric artillery assets in the Luhansk area of operations, which may indicate a prioritization of operations in this area.[14] Ukrainian intelligence reported on December 26 that the Russian military appointed a new Western Military District (WMD) commander who is commanding Russian forces out of a command post in Boguchar, Voronezh Oblast.[15] WMD elements (such as the 144th Motorized Rifle Division) are the principal forces operating in the Luhansk sector and a command change could indicate efforts to support a new decisive effort in this area. Senior Ukrainian officials have stated that Russian forces in Belarus and Zaporizhia are not forming strike groups as of late December, but notably have not made similar statements about Russian forces in Luhansk Oblast.[16] Russian forces have been establishing extensive trenches and field fortifications in Luhansk Oblast for several months—activity that could support a planned Russian decisive effort in the vicinity of Luhansk Oblast. [17] The aforementioned indicators may suggest that Russian forces in Luhansk Oblast are preparing for an offensive operation, as ISW has previously forecasted, but may also indicate preparation for larger spoiling attacks or a defensive counterattack to take advantage of Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts in the area that the Russians expect to stop.[18]

**Russian forces appear less likely to conduct a new offensive in the Zaporizhia Oblast over the winter.** Russian forces are likely establishing defenses against possible Ukrainian offensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.[19] Russian forces likely destroyed a bridge over a river in Polohy on December 28.[20] A senior Ukrainian military official stated on December 28 that there are no signs of Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast forming strike groups despite some rotations and deployments there. [21] Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Deputy Vladimir Rogov claimed on December 27 that Ukrainian forces will conduct an offensive in Zaporizhia Oblast but that the offensive is not imminent because of muddy conditions.[22] Recent Russian mining and fortification efforts in Zaporizhia Oblast and the Dnipro River coastline indicate that Russian forces do not seek to conduct an offensive there.[23]

**The Kremlin continues to systematically deny Ukrainian sovereignty and reiterate that Russia has no genuine intention to engage in negotiation with Ukraine.** Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded to the Ukrainian proposal to prepare a peace initiative at the United Nations in February and emphasized that no peace plan can exist for Ukraine without accounting for the entry of Zaporizhia, Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts into the Russian Federation.[24] Peskov clearly indicated that the Kremlin has no genuine intent to compromise its demands, thus directly undermining the Kremlin's own narrative that Russia is willing to talk but Ukraine is not.[25] ISW has continuously reported that Russia is using the discussion of negotiations as an information operation to force Ukraine into making massive concessions on Russia's terms.[26] Russian leaders' insistence that Ukraine enter negotiations having accepted the illegal Russian annexation of more than 100,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian land emphasizes the lack of genuine interest in negotiations on the part of the Kremlin.

**The Kremlin continues to present the US transfer of Patriot air defense systems and accompanying trainers to Ukraine as an escalation in US-Russia relations, despite the fact that the transfer is if anything less escalatory than previous Western military shipments to Ukraine because Patriot is a purely defensive system.** Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed in a televised interview on December 28 that US officials had guaranteed to not send Patriot air defense

trainers to Ukraine in an effort to refrain from participating in the war.[27] The Kremlin has previously highlighted the US transfer of Patriot air-defense systems in accusations that the United States and the West are waging a proxy war in Ukraine with the intent of weakening or destroying the Russian Federation.[28] The Kremlin uses these accusations in support of information operations that aim to frame Ukraine as a Western puppet devoid of sovereignty and to weaken Western security assistance to Ukraine by stoking fears of Russian escalation.[29] The Kremlin could use any Western transfer of military equipment to Ukraine as support for these information operations. The Kremlin's decision to react to the transfer of the Patriot air defense systems more strongly than to previous weapons transfers indicates that the Kremlin is more concerned with the effect Western help can have on Russia's invasion of Ukraine than with supposed Russian fears of putative Ukrainian offensive actions against the Russian Federation itself using Western systems. That observation is worth considering in the context of Western discussions of providing Ukraine with Western tanks, long-range attack systems, and other capabilities.

ISW forecasts with high confidence that Putin will not seek to engage NATO militarily at this time in response to the provision of any of the Western military systems currently under discussion. Russia is barely holding off the Ukrainian military at a fearful cost to itself and Russian forces in Ukraine could not survive a serious conflict with NATO at this time. The risks of deliberate Russian escalation to a major conflict with NATO in the foreseeable future are thus extremely low.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Russian offensive against Bakhmut is likely culminating.
- Russian forces appear to be preparing for a decisive effort in Luhansk Oblast and appear less likely to conduct a new offensive in Zaporizhia Oblast in the winter of 2023.
- The Kremlin continues to demonstrate that Russia has no genuine intention of engaging in negotiations with Ukraine by insisting that Ukraine accept Russia's illegal annexations of Ukrainian land.
- The Kremlin continues to present the US transfer of Patriot air defense systems as an escalation in US-Russia relations, but ISW forecasts with high confidence that Russia will not deliberately seek to escalate to a major conflict with NATO as a result.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations toward Kremenna, where Russian forces continued counterattacks to regain lost positions.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued defensive and rotational operations in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts.
- The Kremlin has approved additional funds for the development of defensive fortifications and is attempting to staff fortification efforts in Russian border areas and occupied Ukraine.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 27, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that the Kremlin will continue to pursue a military solution to the war until the Ukrainian government capitulates to Russia's demands. Lavrov stated in a December 27 interview with Russian state news wire TASS that Ukraine and the West are "well aware of Russia's proposals on the demilitarization and denazification" of Ukrainian-controlled territory and that the Russian military will settle these issues if Ukraine refuses to accept these proposals.[1] Russian demands for "demilitarization" aim to eliminate Ukraine's ability to resist further Russian attacks, while the demands for "denazification" are tantamount to calls for regime change in Ukraine.[2] Lavrov added that Ukraine and the United States must recognize Russia's seizure of occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts. Lavrov stated that US-controlled Ukraine and the United States are responsible for prolonging the war as they could "put an end to [Ukraine's] senseless resistance."<sup>[3]</sup> Lavrov's invocation of a military settlement for the war in Ukraine that achieves Russia's original war aims follows Russian President Vladimir Putin's deliberately vague statements that Russia is open for negotiations on December 25.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW assessed

that Putin's comments were not an offer to negotiate with Ukraine and indicated that he has not set serious conditions for negotiations.[5]

**Lavrov stated that Russia is unable to work on any agreements with the West due to its provocative actions in Ukraine and elsewhere.** Lavrov stated that the United States and its NATO allies are pursuing "victory over Russia on the battlefield" in Ukraine "as a mechanism for significantly weakening or even destroying" the Russian Federation.[6] Lavrov nonsensically accused US military officials of planning a decapitation blow against the Kremlin that included killing Russian President Vladimir Putin.[7] Lavrov also accused the United States and NATO members of being *de facto* parties to the war in Ukraine and of engaging in dangerous nuclear signaling.[8] Lavrov argued that Russian officials are unable to maintain normal communications or work on any proposals or agreements with the United States under these conditions, as the United States seeks to inflict strategic defeat against the Russian Federation.[9] Lavrov stated that Russian officials are ready to discuss security issues in the context of Ukraine and in a broader, strategic plan, but only when American officials "realize the defectiveness of the current course" and return to "building mutually respectful relations on the basis of the obligatory consideration of legitimate Russian interests."[10]

**The Kremlin will likely continue to focus its grievances against the West and ignore Ukraine as a sovereign entity in support of ongoing information operations that seek to compel the West to offer preemptive concessions and pressure Ukraine to negotiate.** The Kremlin routinely portrays Ukraine as a Western pawn that lacks any actual sovereignty in order to disqualify Ukrainian officials from future direct negotiations and instead frame negotiations with Russia as being the responsibility of Western officials.[11] The Kremlin routinely highlights its grievances with the West over the war in Ukraine instead of its grievances with Ukraine itself to capitalize on the Western desire for negotiations and create a dynamic in which Western officials feel pressed to make preemptive concessions to lure Russia to the negotiating table.[12] The Kremlin will routinely depict Ukrainian officials as needlessly prolonging the war while reiterating its war aims in an attempt to influence Western officials to pressure Ukraine to negotiate on terms more favorable to Russia.[13] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is not interested in serious negotiations that would produce a final settlement to the war in Ukraine, but instead seeks a temporary cessation of hostilities that would allow it to refit and replenish its military for further offensive campaigns against Ukraine.

**The Kremlin is increasingly integrating select milbloggers into its information campaigns, likely in an effort to regain a dominant narrative within the information space.** A prominent Russian milblogger involved in combat in occupied Donetsk Oblast gave a nearly 20-minute interview to a Russian federal channel pushing key Kremlin narratives on mobilization and support for the war effort.[14] The milblogger explained that Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces recruited him out of prison in Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast in 2014, and accused mobilized men who complain to their wives about mobilization and poor conditions on the frontlines of being weak. The milblogger also made a sexist remark that Russian women are making emotional appeals and urged them to refrain from complaining about their husbands' problems. The milblogger criticized Russians who have left the country in protest of the war, stating that those Russians lacked respect for their society and its interests. The milblogger downplayed reports of poor frontline conditions, noting that these conditions are solely the fault of local commanders. These statements are consistent with recent acknowledgments by Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of problems with mobilization and generating support for the war that likely aim to prepare the Russian society for a protracted war.[15] This milblogger had also previously revealed that the Kremlin is now offering to collaborate with the milbloggers.[16]

**The Kremlin has also intensified its efforts to coopt prominent milbloggers by offering them positions of power, which in turn allows them to amplify some elements of official rhetoric.** One Russian milblogger who Putin appointed to the Russian Human Rights Council amplified an official statement from the council claiming that it had not received any information about the forcible mobilization of prisoners to participate in the war.[17] A Russian milblogger who has received a place on Putin's mobilization working group also expressed excitement over the prospect of delivering his concerns directly to Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu during the working group's first meeting on December 28.[18] By offering these positions within the government, the Kremlin enforces self-censorship and introduces its narratives to some figures within the milblogger space. Putin's appointment of these milbloggers to official positions also suggests his approval of their extreme and sometimes genocidal statements.

**The Kremlin could significantly benefit from the integration of some prominent milbloggers' voices into its information space, but Putin remains unlikely to domesticate the entire community.** The Kremlin had partially integrated at least seven of the most prominent milbloggers into its information sphere who are generally not affiliated with other factions such as the Wagner Group, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, or Russian veteran communities. Russian outlets have started to

rank milbloggers and their growing popularity, noting that there are at least 50 extremely influential milbloggers from different factions among thousands of milblogger Telegram channels.[19] A prominent Russian milblogger noted that the milblogger community had been rescuing the Kremlin's poorly-implemented and outdated information campaign while simultaneously pointing out that it is "impossible to centralize" such a vast community.[20] Another milblogger noted that the Kremlin's information efforts are so laughable that it had made the milblogger community "the only decent source of information."[21] The milblogger also stated that some milbloggers still face censorship from the Kremlin, which can ignite tensions within the community.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that the Kremlin will continue to pursue a military solution to the war until the US accepts its demands and forcing Ukraine to do the same.
- Lavrov stated that Russia is unable to work on any agreements with the West due to its supposed provocative actions.
- The Kremlin will likely continue information operations to seek to compel the West to offer preemptive concessions and pressure Ukraine to negotiate.
- The Kremlin is increasingly integrating select milbloggers into its information campaigns, likely in an effort to regain a dominant narrative within the information space.
- Ukrainian forces have likely made more gains in northeast Ukraine than ISW has previously assessed.
- Russian forces may be nearing culmination in the Bakhmut area amid continuing Russian offensive operations there and in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.
- Russian forces are maintaining their fortification efforts in southern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin is continuing its efforts to publicly punish deserters and saboteurs.
- Russian officials are intensifying efforts to deport children from occupied territories to Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 26, 11 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin did not offer to negotiate with Ukraine on December 25 contrary to some reporting.** Putin, in a TV interview, stated that he does not think that the war is approaching a "dangerous line" and noted that Russia has no choice but to continue to defend its citizens, before stating that Russia "is ready to negotiate with all parties" involved in the conflict. [1] Putin did not explicitly state that Russia was ready to negotiate directly with Ukraine, instead maintaining his false narrative that Ukraine – which he simply called the "the other side" - had violated Russia's pre-invasion diplomatic efforts. Putin's discussions of negotiations have focused on putative discussions with the West rather than with Ukraine, and reflect his continual accusations that Ukraine is merely a Western pawn with no real agency.[2] This statement was not a departure from that rhetorical line. Putin also stated that he thinks Russia is "operating in a correct direction," which indicates that he has not set serious conditions for negotiations and still wishes to pursue his maximalist goals.

**Putin's December 25 statement is a part of a deliberate information campaign aimed at misleading the West to push Ukraine into making preliminary concessions.** The Kremlin did not publish the full transcript of Putin's interview on its official website in contrast with its normal pattern, possibly to facilitate the misrepresentation of Putin's full statement originally broadcasted in Russian and highlight his vague statement on negotiations.[3] The Kremlin's use of the interview clip on the Christmas holiday may also be a response to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's recent speech at the US Congress amidst the holiday season.[4] The Kremlin has been intensifying this information campaign throughout December.

**Putin is likely concerned over the lack of support for his war in Ukraine among elites and may be setting information conditions for the nationalization of their property.** Putin pointed out that there are people in Russia who act solely in their self-interest when responding to a relatively positive interview question on his sentiments toward Russians' commitment to the war.[5] Putin added that

99.9% of Russians would sacrifice everything for the “motherland.” Putin’s instant criticism of some members of society suggests that he is focused on those who do not fully support the war rather than on those who do. Putin made similar statements last week, noting that some businessmen who drain Russia’s money aboard are a “danger” to Russia.<sup>[6]</sup> Putin’s statements are also consistent with the Russian State Duma’s preparations to introduce a bill to increase tax rates for Russians who had left the country after the start of the “special military operation,” likely as a form of punishment for evading the war effort.<sup>[7]</sup> The Kremlin will likely use funds generated through the tax to fund its war in Ukraine.

**Ukrainian intelligence reported that a Wagner Group-linked Russian officer was appointed commander of the Russian Western Military District (WMD).** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on December 26 that former Chief of Staff of the Eastern Military District Lieutenant General Evgeny Valerivich Nikiforov was appointed as the new commander of the WMD and that Nikiforov is commanding the Russian western grouping of forces in Ukraine out of a command post in Boguchar, Voronezh Oblast.<sup>[8]</sup> The report states that Nikiforov replaced Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev as WMD commander (November – December 2022) because Nikiforov is a member of the internal Russian *silovik* alliance formed by Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovkin and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Ukrainian intelligence previously reported that Prigozhin formed an alliance with Surovkin and that both Prigozhin and Surovkin are rivals of Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu.<sup>[9]</sup>

Nikiforov has previous experience commanding Wagner Group elements in Donbas from 2014 to 2015. A Bellingcat investigation found that Wagner founder Dmitry Utkin reported to Nikiforov – among other Russian military intelligence officials – when Nikiforov was the Chief of Staff of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army in 2015.<sup>[10]</sup> A Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) investigation found that Nikiforov ordered Utkin and his Wagner Group to destroy a Ukrainian Il-76 transport plane on June 14, 2014.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Ukrainian strikes on legitimate military targets far in the Russian rear continue to be points of neuralgia for the Russian milblogger community.** Russian sources began reporting explosions near the Engels Airbase in Saratov Oblast on the night of December 25 and the morning of December 26.<sup>[12]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that Russian air defense shot down a Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that was approaching the Engels airfield at low altitude and that the wreckage of the UAV killed three Russian servicemen.<sup>[13]</sup> Several prominent Russian milbloggers latched onto the Russian MoD report on the incident as an opportunity to criticize domestic Russian air defense capabilities and question Russian authorities’ handling of and response to reported Ukrainian strikes deep in the Russian rear. One Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger questioned why Russian air defense only “miraculously” prevents strikes “exactly above the airfield/military unit” and noted that the Engels airfield is 500km into Russian territory.<sup>[14]</sup> Former militant commander and prominent Russian milblogger Igor Girkin sarcastically congratulated Russian air defense for activating before striking the airbase and questioned why Russia is allowing Ukrainian drones so deep into its territory.<sup>[15]</sup> Several Russian milbloggers also criticized the technical capabilities of Russian air defense and electronic warfare systems and voiced their concern over Russian authorities’ inability to protect critical Russian infrastructure.<sup>[16]</sup> Prominent voices in the pro-war information space will likely continue to seize on perceived attacks on Russian domestic security to criticize Russian military capabilities and leadership and call for escalated actions against Ukraine.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin did not offer to negotiate with Ukraine on December 25 contrary to some reporting.**
- **Putin is likely concerned over the lack of support for his war in Ukraine among elites and may be setting information conditions for the nationalization of their property.**
- **Ukrainian intelligence reported that a Wagner Group-linked Russian officer was appointed commander of the Russian Western Military District (WMD).**
- **Ukrainian strikes on legitimate military targets far in the Russian rear continue to be points of neuralgia for the Russian milblogger community.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.**
- **Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian troops are fighting near Kremenna.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made limited gains northeast of Bakhmut.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks on the western outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian military officials indicated that Russian forces may be concentrating some unspecified forces for offensive or demonstration operations in Zaporizhia Oblast and that Russian forces are attempting to conduct small-scale reconnaissance-in-force operations to reach right-bank Kherson Oblast.**

- Russian officials and nationalists began to criticize the Kremlin's lenient migration and passportization policies for Central Asian migrants.
  - Russia is continuing efforts to consolidate control of occupied territories in Ukraine through the manipulation of citizenship procedures.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 24, 7 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

*Note: ISW and CTP will not publish a campaign assessment (or maps) tomorrow, December 25, in observance of the Christmas holiday. Coverage will resume Monday, December 26.*

**Russian forces' rate of advance in the Bakhmut area has likely slowed in recent days, although it is too early to assess whether the Russian offensive to capture Bakhmut has culminated.** Russian milbloggers acknowledged that Ukrainian forces in the Bakhmut area have managed to slightly slow down the pace of the Russian advance around Bakhmut and its surrounding settlements, with one claiming that Ukrainian forces pushed back elements of the Wagner Group to positions they held days ago.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian social media sources previously claimed that Ukrainian forces completely pushed Russian forces out of the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut around December 21.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW has also assessed that Russian forces made slightly fewer overall advances in the Bakhmut area in November and December combined as compared to the month of October.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Russian forces will likely struggle to maintain the pace of their offensive operations in the Bakhmut area and may seek to initiate a tactical or operational pause.** The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on December 24 that Russian forces currently lack the necessary stockpile of artillery munitions to support large-scale offensive operations and that sustaining defensive operations along the lengthy frontline in Ukraine requires the Russian military to expend a significant number of shells and rockets daily.<sup>[4]</sup> The Ukrainian Joint Forces Task Force released an interview on December 24 with a Ukrainian servicemember in the Bakhmut area detailing that Russian forces have been conducting an extremely high pace of assaults on Ukrainian positions in the area with little corresponding progress.<sup>[5]</sup> The Wagner Group's reported heavy losses in the Bakhmut area in recent weeks have also likely strained Russian forces' current operational capabilities in the area.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Russian military's personnel and munitions constraints will likely prevent it from maintaining the current high pace of offensive operations in the Bakhmut area in the near-term. Russian forces previously allocated significant resources in a meat-grinder effort to seize Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in spring–summer 2022. Russian forces culminated after capturing Lysychansk in early July and failed to capture neighboring Siversk to the east or Slovyansk to the northeast. The Russian military's fixation with conducting a highly attritional campaign to achieve the tactical objectives of capturing Severodonetsk and Lysychansk ultimately undermined the Russian military's ability to achieve its larger operational objective to envelop Ukrainian forces in a cauldron along the E40 highway and eventually drive to Donetsk Oblast's western administrative borders. Russia's relentless and costly push on Bakhmut may also degrade Russia's ability to pursue long-term objectives in the Donbas theater.

**Russian siloviki may be setting information conditions to justify the nationalization of oligarchs' resources to sponsor Russia's war effort.** Wagner financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin attended the funeral of a deceased Wagner Group mercenary in St. Petersburg on December 24, where he stated that Russia needs to confiscate luxury possessions and accommodations from elites who ignore or do not support the war effort out of fear of losing their privileged lifestyles.<sup>[7]</sup> Prigozhin added that these affluent individuals support a vision where "Western curators" dominate Russia in return for the sponsorship of their lifestyles and compared today's Russian oligarchy to Ukraine's or to 1990s Russia. Prigozhin ignited a scandal regarding the burial of the Wagner serviceman in recent weeks to push his political objectives — such as the legalization of Wagner in Russia — and his statements advocating redistribution of wealth at the funeral gained significant traction on the Russian internet.<sup>[8]</sup> Wagner-affiliated milbloggers widely supported Prigozhin's criticism of Russian officials and praised

his support for the war effort.[9] Prigozhin may be using such populist proposals to elevate his authority in Russian society or influence a return of stricter nationalization measures.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also indirectly attacked Russian oligarchs on December 22, however, stating that Russians who drain Russia's money from abroad and do not have a connection with the country "represent a danger" to Russia.[10] Putin claimed that while the vast majority of Russian businessmen are patriots, there are some who do not share the sentiment. Putin concluded that "everyone strives not only to stay, to live and work in Russia but to work for the benefit of our country." Putin previously nationalized big businesses in the early 2000s to consolidate his authoritarian kleptocracy and may be attempting leverage nationalization to coerce elites to support his war in Ukraine or seize their property to fund military expenses.[11]

**Ukrainian intelligence continues to suggest that the Russian military is not following proper command structures or procedures.** Chief of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Kyrylo Budanov stated that Prigozhin formed an alliance with the Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin.[12] Budanov noted that both Prigozhin and Surovikin are rivals of Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, and that Prigozhin used the alliance to his advantage to receive heavy weapons from Russian Armed Forces for Wagner forces. The allocation of military resources should in principle rest with the Minister of Defense rather than the theater commander, although Surovikin could have the authority to make transfers once equipment enters the theater. The Prigozhin–Surovikin alliance is plausible given that Prigozhin had previously praised Surovikin for his efforts to save the collapsing Soviet Union.[13]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces will likely struggle to maintain the pace of their offensive operations in the Bakhmut area and may seek to initiate a tactical or operational pause.
- Russian *siloviki* may be setting information conditions to justify the nationalization of oligarchs' resources to sponsor Russia's war effort.
- Ukrainian intelligence continues to suggest that the Russian military is not following proper command structures or procedures.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Kremenna-Svatove line.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian SPETSNAZ are likely reconnoitering the Dnipro River delta to study Ukrainian defenses in right bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces struck a residential area of Kherson City with a Grad multiple launch rocket system, killing at least 10 and injuring 55.
- The Russian Orthodox Church — a Kremlin-affiliated institution — asked the Kremlin for a mobilization exemption for its clergy, despite avidly supporting Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.
- Russian officials are planning to take children from Horlivka, Donetsk to Belarus, possibly as a scheme to deport Ukrainian children.
- ISW introduced a new section in the update to track daily observed indicators and counter-indicators consistent with the current assessed most dangerous course of action – a Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 23, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Moscow has been setting conditions for a new most dangerous course of action (MDCOA)—a renewed invasion of northern Ukraine possibly aimed at Kyiv—since at least October 2022.**

[1] This MDCOA could be a Russian information operation or could reflect Russian President Vladimir Putin's actual intentions. Currently available indicators are ambivalent—some verified evidence of a Russian buildup in Belarus makes more sense as part of preparations for a renewed offensive than as part of ongoing exercises and training practices, but there remains no evidence that Moscow is actively preparing a strike force in Belarus. Concern about the possibility that Putin might pursue this

MDCOA is certainly not merely a Ukrainian information operation intended to pressure the West into supplying Kyiv with more weapons, as some Western analysts have suggested. ISW continues to assess that a renewed large-scale Russian invasion from Belarus is unlikely this winter, but it is a possibility that must be taken seriously.

**Prominent Russian pro-war milbloggers are amplifying the possibility of the MDCOA over the winter-spring period.** Former Russian military commander Igor Girkin, a prominent critical voice in the Russian milblogger space, responded to ongoing discussions within the Russian information space on December 23 about Russia's capacity to renew an assault on northwestern Ukraine from Belarus to sever ground lines of communication (GLOCs) between Kyiv and Europe.<sup>[2]</sup> Girkin broke the MDCOA into two possible sub-courses of action: Russia can invade from Belarus in an effort to capture territory or could alternatively conduct a diversionary operation to draw Ukrainian forces from other parts of the theater.<sup>[3]</sup> Girkin argued that the Russian military could not effectively conduct an offensive operation to capture territory, but that a diversionary operation to support a Russian offensive elsewhere in Ukraine would make military sense. Girkin also pointed out that public discourse about this MDCOA had spread throughout the Russian-language internet and noted that other prominent milbloggers have hypothesized different scenarios for the MDCOA.<sup>[4]</sup>

Some milbloggers have been speculating about the likelihood of a renewed Russian attack on northern Ukraine since at least October 2022. Prominent Russian Telegram channel *Rybar*, whose author is currently part of Putin's mobilization working group, stated on October 20 that there were rumors of an "imminent" Russian offensive operation on Lviv, Volyn, Kyiv, Chernihiv, or Kharkiv.<sup>[5]</sup> Another milblogger claimed on October 20 that joint forces in Belarus are too small to attack Kyiv but stated that he would not object if Russian forces attacked Chernihiv City.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Putin's upcoming meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in St. Petersburg on December 26-27 will advance the Russian information operation around the MDCOA even if it does not directly support preparations for it.** Lukashenko's office announced that Putin and Lukashenko will meet during a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) heads of state meeting in St. Petersburg on December 26-27.<sup>[7]</sup> This meeting will advance the Kremlin's existing information operation about the MDCOA, as Putin's December 19 visit to Minsk did, given the growing Russian military presence in Belarus.<sup>[8]</sup>

**The Russian military continues to trip limited indicators for the MCDOA, reinforcing an information operation designed to establish the plausibility of the MDCOA or actual preparations for executing the MDCOA.** The Russian Ministry of Defense ostentatiously announced on November 24 that it has a field hospital in Belarus.<sup>[9]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 23 that Russian forces are planning to deploy at least one more field hospital in Belarus.<sup>[10]</sup> Field hospitals are not necessary for training exercises and could indicate preparation for combat operations. The appearance of field hospitals in Belarus in early 2022 was among the final indicators observed before Russia commenced its full-scale invasion.<sup>[11]</sup> Russia continues to deploy forces to Belarus under the rubric of training. Some Russian T-90 tanks, reportedly deployed to Belarus in late December 2022, were observed with winter camouflage.<sup>[12]</sup> Equipping tanks with winter camouflage is not wholly necessary for training activity and could indicate preparation for actual winter combat operations. The deployment of field hospitals and repainting tanks could also be parts of an information operation.

**The Russian military has been much more clearly setting conditions for an offensive in northwestern Luhansk Oblast, however.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported observing an increased volume of railway transport of personnel, military equipment, and ammunition to combat areas on December 23.<sup>[13]</sup> Geolocated footage published on December 23 also shows a train loaded with Russian T-90M and T-62M tanks heading toward Luhansk Oblast from Rostov Oblast.<sup>[14]</sup> ISW previously observed Russian forces transferring elite airborne troops and other elements that previously operated in the Kherson and Kharkiv directions to Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[15]</sup> The Kremlin continues to prioritize committing mobilized men to stabilize the Svatove-Kremina line over other areas of the front such as Bakhmut, Avdiivka, or western Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces are unlikely to attack across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast after just withdrawing from western Kherson, and Russian mining and fortification efforts in Zaporizhia Oblast indicate that Russian forces do not seek to conduct an offensive there. The Kremlin could also attempt a spoiling attack on southeastern Kharkiv Oblast from Luhansk Oblast to regain lost territories west of the Oskil River. It is far from clear whether Russian forces would be able to effectively conduct such an operation since the terrain advantages the Ukrainian defenders and Russian offensive capabilities are very limited.

**The Russian military may nevertheless attempt to conduct a diversionary attack on the ground or in the information space against northern Ukraine, likely in an effort to divert Ukrainian forces from defending in Donbas or in conjunction with an offensive in Luhansk or, less**

**plausibly, elsewhere.** Chief of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Kyrylo Budanov stated on December 23 that Russia is trying to divert Ukrainian forces from the southeast by setting up a feint in Belarus, noting that military activity in Belarus is an element of a disinformation campaign.[16] The success of the Russian diversionary attack, however, relies on Russia's ability to convince Ukraine of the plausibility of the threat of a deeper offensive operation. Ukrainian military officials continue to indicate that Ukrainian forces are prepared to defend their northern borders, and Ukraine's fierce defenses around Bakhmut demonstrate that Ukrainian forces can hold off much larger numbers of Russian attackers.[17]

**ISW's December 15 MDCOA warning forecast about a potential Russian offensive against northern Ukraine in winter 2023 remains a worst-case scenario within the forecast cone.** [18] ISW currently assesses the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus as low, but possible. Belarusian forces remain extremely unlikely to invade Ukraine without a Russian strike force. Ukrainian military officials noted that Russia had not created strike groups in Belarus.[19] Russian milbloggers also note that Russia has not fixed fundamental flaws in its military campaign such as the lack of new equipment, poor leadership, and insufficient forces to sustain a successful offensive operation.[20]

**Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is reportedly preparing to present a peace plan in February 2023, which may be timed to exploit a failed Russian winter offensive.** The *Wall Street Journal*, citing Ukrainian and European diplomats, reported on December 22 that Zelensky's team is planning to present an unspecified peace plan in February 2023.[21] Zelensky laid out a 10-point peace plan at the G20 summit in November 2022 that requires Russia to make concessions, including withdrawing all its troops from Ukraine and respecting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity under international law.[22] Zelensky may be preparing to present this peace plan around an anticipated failed Russian military offensive in early 2023.

**The Kremlin continues to deflect criticism about Russia's military failures in Ukraine by rhetorically narrowing the definitions of its initial war objectives without formally changing them.** When asked about the Russian invasion's progress, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that Russian forces achieved "significant progress" in its war objective of "demilitarization" of Ukraine on December 23.[23] Girkin lambasted Peskov's response, sarcastically noting that Ukraine's armed forces increased from about 250,000 personnel before the war to 700,000 personnel today and that Ukrainian forces are now equipped with advanced Western anti-tank ground missiles, precision artillery, and other systems that Ukraine did not have before Russia's invasion.[24] ISW continues to assess that Russia's maximalist war objectives have not changed despite Peskov's floundering to save face with the Kremlin's Russian domestic audience.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's renewed public appearances likely indicate that he has become more concerned about his popularity and image in Russia.** Putin has been seemingly making more public appearances in Russian cities and more frequently delivering vague statements about Russia's invasion of Ukraine in recent days compared to his marked absence from public activity outside the Kremlin throughout the first ten months of the war.[25] Putin visited the KBP Instrument Design Bureau in Tula Oblast (an arms manufacturing facility) on December 23 and reportedly also planned to visit the Uralvagonzavod machine-building factory in Nizhny Tagil on the same day before canceling the event at the last minute.[26] Such appearances are likely a part of the Kremlin's effort to present Putin as a wartime leader and regain the dominant narrative in the domestic information space as Russia heads into the second year of the war.[27] Putin consistently relied on in-person appearances throughout his rule, which helped him to create an image of an all-seeing and ever-present ruler.[28] Putin may be attempting to set favorable conditions in the information space ahead of Russia's next presidential elections in early 2024.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- ISW assesses that the Kremlin has been setting conditions for a new most dangerous course of action (MDCOA)—a renewed offensive from Belarus possibly aimed at Kyiv—since at least October 2022. The Kremlin may be conducting an information operation or may actually be preparing for this MDCOA, which ISW continues to assess to be unlikely but possible.
- Prominent Russian pro-war milbloggers are amplifying the possibility of the MDCOA over the winter-spring period.
- The Russian military continues to trip indicators for the MCDOA, reinforcing an information operation designed to establish the plausibility of the MDCOA or preparations to execute it.
- The Russian military has more clearly been setting conditions for an offensive in northwestern Luhansk Oblast.

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is reportedly preparing to present a peace plan in February 2023, which could be timed to exploit a failed Russian winter offensive.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's renewed public appearances likely indicate that he has become more concerned about his popularity and image in Russia.
- Russian forces conducted at least two reconnaissance-in-force operations in northern and northeastern Ukraine on December 22-23.
- Ukrainian forces likely made tactical gains east and south of Bakhmut City over the past 72 hours.
- Russian forces are continuing to establish defensive positions in left-bank Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts and are conducting defensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin is intensifying its censorship efforts to silence concerns over an expansion of the Russian Armed Forces and a second mobilization wave.
- Ukrainian partisans continued to target Russian officials in occupied territories.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Madison Williams, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 22, 7 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to refuse to treat Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as an equal and sovereign counterpart, further indicating that Putin is not interested in serious negotiations with Ukraine. Putin did not react to Zelensky's remarks to the United States Congress in Washington, DC on December 22, but instead oriented his December 22 press conference on US and Western influence over Ukraine.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin reiterated his boilerplate and false claims that the US and Western countries have intervened in Ukraine since the Soviet Union, driving a wedge in the supposed Russian-Ukrainian historic and cultural unity. Such statements are meant to suggest that Ukraine's 1991 emergence as a sovereign state was a sham. Putin also restated Russia's maximalist goal of "protecting" the Ukrainian people from their government, implying that Russia intends to force the Kyiv government to capitulate. Putin mentioned Ukraine as a state only to note falsely that Ukraine had barred itself from negotiating with Russia.

**Putin's rhetoric is a part of an ongoing Russian information operation that denies Ukraine's legitimacy as a sovereign state.** Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Zelensky's speech to the US Congress and the US transfer to Ukraine of the Patriot air-defense systems only "proves" that the United States is fighting a proxy war in Ukraine, and that there are no signs of readiness for peace talks.<sup>[2]</sup> Putin also implied that Russia had hoped that the West would coach Ukraine into abiding by the Minsk Agreements but instead was fooled by Kyiv. Such framing aims to disqualify Ukraine from future direct negotiations under the false premises that Ukraine violated the Minsk Agreements and that Kyiv is not an independent actor. Putin's and Peskov's framing are components of an effort to persuade the United States and NATO to bypass Ukraine and negotiate directly with Russia over Zelensky's head. This effort is very unlikely to succeed given repeated statements by US and European leaders regarding their determination that Ukraine will decide its own course. The Kremlin's information operation is also likely meant to focus blame for "protracting" the war on Zelensky's supposed intransigence and thereby wear down US and European willingness to continue supporting Ukrainian efforts to liberate occupied Ukrainian land.

**Putin amplified another existing Russian information operation designed to decrease Western security assistance for Ukraine.** Putin falsely accused the United States of protracting the war in Ukraine by providing Patriot air defense systems and vaguely implied that these systems will not perform a defensive purpose.<sup>[3]</sup> Putin has been setting conditions for a protracted war long before the US decision to transfer Patriots to Ukraine, even stating on December 7 that the "special military operation" would be a lengthy process.<sup>[4]</sup> The Kremlin has also long falsely framed any Western security assistance to Ukraine as an escalation.<sup>[5]</sup> The Patriot system will instead augment Ukraine's ability to protect critical civilian infrastructure against Russia's air and missile campaign, which is designed to inflict suffering on Ukraine's civilian population. Patriot systems will interfere with Putin's ability to hammer Ukraine into surrendering on his terms, which may be what Putin has in mind when he says that it protracts the war.

**Putin is also doubling down on an effort to absolve himself of responsibility for conducting a protracted war in Ukraine.** Putin made several statements that Russia seeks to end the war as soon as possible while simultaneously noting that Russia will not increase the pace of "special military operation" because that would lead to "unjustified losses." Both statements are a part of the Kremlin's consolidated effort to justify Putin's costly war effort to Russian domestic audiences who are increasingly making greater sacrifices to fulfill the Kremlin's unrealistic goals. The Russian military has not achieved any significant victories in Ukraine since the fall of Lysychansk on July 3. Putin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officials have made numerous appearances and offered vague justifications for military failures in recent days, also likely in an effort to downplay the effects of the protracted war.

**Putin's use of the term "war" when regarding the invasion of Ukraine has prompted some confusion within the Russian information space.** Putin had stated during the press conference that Russia seeks "not to spin this flywheel of a military conflict, but on the contrary - to end this war." Putin used this word—war--instead of the phrasing "special military operation" when falsely accusing Ukraine of starting a war against its population in 2014. Putin's mention of "war" prompted a few milbloggers to state that they have always used both terms interchangeably because "every thinking person knows that what is happening in Ukraine is a hot war," despite the lack of an official declaration of war by Russia.<sup>[6]</sup> The confusion indicates that Putin's limited war narrative may conflict with his presentation of the "special military operation" as a fight for Russia's sovereignty while not being an official war.

**The Russian Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, attempted to revive a debunked Russian narrative that the Kremlin did not plan to invade Ukraine in an effort to justify Russia's war in Ukraine.** Gerasimov publicly reemerged to brief foreign military attaches on December 22, stating that Russia had to launch the "special military operation" in response to the growing "neo-Nazi ideology" in Ukraine, and Kyiv's (non-existent) active military preparations to liberate Donbas and Crimea in early 2022.<sup>[7]</sup> US intelligence had exposed the Kremlin's elaborate plan to stage a series of false flag attacks in eastern Ukraine in early February, attacks that the Kremlin intended to trigger and justify a war.<sup>[8]</sup> Gerasimov may be attempting to revive this nonsensical information operation to help justify the war to a domestic Russian audience. Gerasimov also noted that Russian forces are focusing most of their efforts on seizing Donetsk Oblast, which also signals a return to the pre-war narrative in a likely attempt to regain public support for the war. This statement is also inaccurate—Donetsk Oblast is the site of the only active Russian offensive operation, but the majority of Russia's combat power is in other parts of Ukraine.

The Kremlin had refrained from publicly showing Gerasimov for almost ten months until December 17 and is likely attempting to reintroduce him as another figure responsible for the war as it heads into the second year of the invasion.<sup>[9]</sup> Gerasimov continued Putin's and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's explanations for mobilization and even attempted to explain away Russia's withdrawal from right-bank Kherson Oblast as a preventative measure because of the "threat" of a Ukrainian high-precision strike on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant. Gerasimov also claimed that Russia had stabilized the frontline along an 815km stretch of land. Gerasimov's appearance is likely a continuation of the Kremlin's recent efforts to rationalize the cost of war in Ukraine, rally support for a protracted war, and reestablish its preferred narratives.<sup>[10]</sup>

**The Kremlin found it necessary to claim that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu visited the frontlines in Ukraine for the second time in a week, likely to deflect criticism that Shoigu is not an involved wartime leader.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted a video on December 22 purporting to show Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu inspecting Russian troop positions near the front in Ukraine.<sup>[11]</sup> The Russian MoD is on the defensive in the Russian domestic information space. It does not have the informational initiative and is responding to popular criticisms about the Russian military's shortcomings in the war in Ukraine. The Russian MoD likely felt it necessary to show Shoigu at the front lines because it had falsely claimed that Shoigu visited the frontline on December 18, when he actually visited Russian rear areas for a photo-op near the Crimea-Kherson border.<sup>[12]</sup> The matter became more embarrassing following Ukrainian President Zelensky's real frontline visit to Bakhmut on December 20.<sup>[13]</sup>

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to seek to elevate the importance of the Wagner Group in Russian military operations in Ukraine in order to establish himself as the central figure of Russia's ultra-nationalist pro-war community.** US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby reported on December 22 that the Wagner Group received an arms shipment from North Korea to help bolster Russian forces in Ukraine and that this indicates that the Wagner Group's role in the war may be expanding.<sup>[14]</sup> Kirby reported on November 2 that North Korea is covertly supplying artillery shells to Russia.<sup>[15]</sup> Prigozhin denied Kirby's reporting and claimed that North Korea has not supplied weapons to Russia for a long time.<sup>[16]</sup> Kirby also reported

that Prigozhin is spending more than 100 million US dollars per month to fund the Wagner Group's operations in Ukraine and that the Wagner Group currently has 50,000 personnel deployed to Ukraine, including 10,000 contractors and 40,000 convicts recruited from Russian prisons.<sup>[17]</sup> Kirby stated that US intelligence believes that the Wagner Group plays a major role in offensive operations to capture Bakhmut and that more than 1,000 Wagner Group personnel have been killed in recent weeks in the Bakhmut area.<sup>[18]</sup>

Prigozhin is likely attempting to use his parallel military structures to provide the Russian military with capacities that the Russian military currently lacks in order to increase his influence. North Korea's reported shipment of weapons to the Russian military using the Wagner Group as an intermediary may suggest that Prigozhin is attempting to use his private military company to secure foreign sources of weapons that would be more difficult for the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to officially procure. Prigozhin is also likely committing a substantial amount of personnel and resources to the Wagner Group's operations in the Bakhmut area in hopes of providing the Russian military with an operational success that has eluded the Russian Armed Forces in the Bakhmut area as well as the wider theater in Ukraine. ISW assesses that Prigozhin likely has ambitious political goals and seeks to capitalize on the Kremlin's need for more capable forces to accumulate influence and appeal to the ultra-nationalist constituency he hopes to leverage.<sup>[19]</sup> Prigozhin will likely continue to expand the Wagner Group's outsized role in the war in Ukraine in pursuit of these political goals.

**International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director general Rafael Grossi held talks with Russian officials on the creation of a security zone around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).** Grossi traveled to Moscow and met with a Russian delegation that included Rosatom head Alexey Likhachev on December 22.<sup>[20]</sup> Grossi reiterated the IAEA's position that a safety zone around the ZNPP should be established exclusively to prevent a nuclear accident.<sup>[21]</sup> Rosatom stated that talks with the IAEA will continue based on an "understanding of the need to reach a mutually acceptable text as soon as possible."<sup>[22]</sup> ISW assesses that Russian officials are attempting to use the negotiations for the creation of a safety zone around the ZNPP to force the IAEA to accept Russian control over the plant and *de facto* recognize the illegal Russian annexation of occupied Zaporizhzhia Oblast.<sup>[23]</sup> The IAEA Board of Governors has announced that it does not recognize the illegal Russian seizure and operation of the ZNPP, but the Kremlin will likely attempt to leverage the IAEA's stated urgency to reach an agreement on the creation of a security zone to undermine that position.<sup>[24]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to refuse to treat Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as an equal and sovereign counterpart, further indicating that he is not interested in serious negotiations with Ukraine.
- Putin's rhetoric is a part of an ongoing Russian information operation that denies Ukraine's legitimacy as a sovereign state.
- Putin amplified an existing Russian information operation designed to decrease Western security assistance for Ukraine.
- Putin is continuing to absolve himself of responsibility for conducting a protracted war in Ukraine.
- Russian Chief of General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, attempted to revive a debunked Russian narrative that the Kremlin invaded Ukraine to preempt a fictitious planned Ukrainian attack on Russian-occupied Donbas and Crimea.
- The Kremlin claimed that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited the frontlines in Ukraine for the second time in a week, likely to deflect criticism that Shoigu is not an involved wartime leader.
- Wagner Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to seek to elevate the importance of the Wagner Group to establish himself as the central figure of Russia's ultra-nationalist pro-war community.
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director general Rafael Grossi held talks with Russian officials on the creation of a security zone around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited counterattacks along the Kremminna-Svatove line and Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Kremminna area.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas.
- Russian forces are increasing security measures in Kherson Oblast and Crimea out of fear of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.
- A senior Russian official denied claims of a second wave of mobilization amidst ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Ukrainian partisans continued to target Russian occupation authorities.

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George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, Layne Philipson, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 21, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu presided over a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium in Moscow on December 21 and made significant statements pertaining to Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the strategic direction of the Russian military.

The Kremlin intensified its information operation accusing NATO expansion of presenting a **military threat to Russia**.<sup>[1]</sup> Shoigu stated that NATO's military expansion near Russian borders, including Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership aspirations, necessitates an "appropriate" Russian response to establish a Russian force group in northwestern Russia.<sup>[2]</sup> Senior Kremlin officials said that the accession of the Nordic states to NATO would not threaten Russia in spring 2022. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that Finland and Sweden joining NATO would not present an existential threat to Russia in April 2022 and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Finland and Sweden joining NATO would not make "much difference" in May 2022.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Shoigu publicly presented a series of proposed Russian defense policy changes to significantly increase the size of the Russian military.** Shoigu proposed that Russia reestablish the Moscow and Leningrad military districts, form a new army corps, and form 17 new maneuver divisions.<sup>[4]</sup> Shoigu suggested that Russia form a new army corps in Karelia, two new airborne assault divisions, three new motorized rifle divisions in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, and expand seven existing brigades of the Northern Fleet and Western, Central, and Eastern Military districts into seven new motorized rifle divisions while expanding five existing naval infantry brigades into five naval infantry divisions. Shoigu also proposed that Russia form five artillery divisions to support military districts.<sup>[5]</sup> He proposed increasing the strength of the Russian Armed Forces to 1.5 million servicemen, including 695,000 contract servicemen (Shoigu said in spring 2021 that 380,000 Russians were contract servicemen), gradually increasing the age of conscription for military service from 18 to 21 years and raising the age limit for conscripts from 27 to 30 years. Shoigu did not specify a timeline for these measures.

This is not the first time the Russian MoD has signaled its intention to reverse the 2008 Serdyukov reforms that largely disbanded Russian ground forces divisions in favor of independent brigades. The Russian MoD has been steadily reversing the Serdyukov reforms by restoring maneuver divisions across Russian military districts since 2013.<sup>[6]</sup>

**The Kremlin is very unlikely to form such a large conventional force in a timeline that is relevant for Russia's war in Ukraine, however.** Forming divisions is costly and takes time. It took the Russian military over a year to reform the 150th Motorized Rifle Division (8th Combined Arms Army) between 2016 and 2017, for example.<sup>[7]</sup> Russia was unable to fully staff its existing brigades and regiments before the full-scale invasion and had not fully built out a new division it announced it was forming in 2020 before the start of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> Russia's economy is in recession, and its resources to generate divisions have significantly decreased since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>[9]</sup> Russia's net training capacity has likely decreased since February 24, in part because the Kremlin deployed training elements to participate in combat in Ukraine and these training elements reportedly took causalities.<sup>[10]</sup> Russia is reportedly leveraging Belarusian trainers to train mobilized forces and possibly contract soldiers and conscripts, indicating the limitations of Russian training bandwidth.<sup>[11]</sup> Russia's officer corps has been eviscerated by casualties in this war.

Shoigu's proposals could be an overture to placate the milblogger community who have accused the Kremlin of not conducting the war seriously or taking the measures necessary to win the war. It also sets information conditions for the Kremlin to conduct future mobilization waves under the rubric of staffing these formations and/or significantly augmenting Russia's military strength in the long run.

**The Kremlin can form a large conventional military along the lines Shoigu described that would be capable of posing a renewed and serious threat to NATO if Russian President Vladimir Putin decides to fundamentally change Russia's strategic resource allocation over the long run.** Putin directly addressed Shoigu and the Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov stating that Russia has no financial limitations and must provide everything the Russian Armed Forces request.<sup>[12]</sup> While

Russia is unlikely to reform large divisions while continuing its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's military defeats in Ukraine may persuade Putin to change Russia's strategic resource allocation for the Russian military. Putin can decide to appropriate Russian state funds in such a manner that allows the Kremlin to field a large conventional military at the expense of economic growth and consumer comforts as the Soviets did. Such a course of action would cost resources and time but is possible. Shoigu's "recommendations," which he certainly presented to Putin privately before describing them publicly, along with Putin's commitment to providing the Russian military with everything it needs and a number of other indicators suggest that Putin may have already decided to reconstitute a significant conventional Russian military threat to Europe once this war ends.

**Putin and Shoigu demonstrated that Russia is not interested in reducing its war efforts or its war aims, despite the growing toll on Russian society.** Putin reiterated that Russia will ensure the safety of all Russian territories including illegally-annexed territories in Ukraine while at the MoD Collegium.[13] Putin and Shoigu repeatedly rejected the idea of independent Ukrainian sovereignty and emphasized Russia's need to keep Ukraine within the Kremlin's sphere of influence and defeat the Ukrainian "Nazi" regime.[14] Putin and Shoigu's comments further illustrate that the Kremlin retains maximalist goals for the war in Ukraine that include: the recognition of illegally annexed territories, regime change of the Ukrainian government under the pretext of "denazification," control of Ukraine's political and social character, and Western granting of Russia's desired "security guarantees."

**The reiteration of Putin's February 24 goals indicates that the Kremlin is deciding to embrace the sacrifices of the war and attempt to push on to victory.** The Kremlin will need to continue to ask for and justify great sacrifices from its people to pursue these unrealistic goals. Shoigu attempted to justify the societal cost of mobilization, acknowledging that mobilization was "a serious test" for Russian society necessary to defend newly acquired territories in Ukraine.[15] Putin likely believes that if he downscals his maximalist set of goals or defined lesser short-term objectives he would incur widespread discontent from both the wider Russian public and the ultra-nationalist pro-war community for committing Russia to a costly war in pursuit of an inadequate reward. The Kremlin will likely continue to reiterate maximalist goals as it demands further sacrifices from the Russian public to support the war effort, whether through new force generation efforts, imposing the continued long-term economic impacts of international sanctions regimes, extracting from the populace the cost of rebuilding a powerful Russian military, or forcing the Russian people to continue to accept heavy Russian casualties in Ukraine.

**Putin and Shoigu maintained the Kremlin's information operation that seeks to coerce the West into pushing Ukraine to negotiate on Russia's terms.** Shoigu claimed during his speech that the Kremlin is always open to holding constructive, peaceful negotiations.[16] Putin and Shoigu likely reiterated Russian maximalist goals at the Russian MoD Collegium at a time when Ukrainian officials are discussing the possibility of a renewed Russian large-scale offensive in the winter of 2023 and voices are rising in the West calling for Ukraine to initiate negotiations with Moscow to add further pressure on Ukraine to negotiate on Russian terms.[17] The Kremlin likely believes that it will be able to exact more preemptive concessions from Ukraine the more maximalist its stated goals for the war are as it also prepares what it is presenting as another large-scale offensive operation. The Kremlin's effort to coerce Ukraine into negotiating or offering preemptive concessions is increasingly divorced from the battlefield reality in Ukraine where Ukrainian forces retain the initiative.[18]

**Putin significantly intensified his efforts to make peace with the critical pro-war community in the past 48 hours.** Putin admitted at the MoD collegium meeting that Russian forces had faced challenges with mobilization, lack of drones and new equipment, and signals.[19] Shoigu acknowledged similar concerns echoing criticism from prominent Russian milbloggers for 10 months of the war.[20] Putin then asked the Russian MoD "to be attentive" to all criticism and "hear those who do not hush up the existing problems," noting that the ministry will be in constant dialogue with such critics.

Putin also established a working group on December 20 that will address issues with mobilization and offer social and legal support for participants of the "special military operation," empowering some milbloggers.[21] Putin recruited several prominent milbloggers such as Mikhail Zvinchuk from *Rybar*, Evgeniy Poddubny, and Alexander Sladkov among others, as well as some state officials to compile a monthly report to be delivered directly to Putin. The working group has the authority to make proposals and review mobilization concerns.

**Putin is likely seeking to preempt further criticism and regain control over the domestic narrative in support of a protracted war.** Putin has exhibited a pattern in which he gradually grants a level of limited authority to select milbloggers following an increase in criticism. ISW observed that Putin first interacted with milbloggers in mid-June shortly following Russia's failed crossing of the Siverskyi Donets River and general frustrations with Russia's slow pace in Donbas.[22] Putin has

since made several public statements in support of frontline and mobilization coverage and even appointed a prominent milblogger and correspondent for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Alexander (Sasha) Kots a member of the Russian Human Rights Council on November 20.[23] Kots previously operated in Kherson City, and his appointment followed Russia's withdrawal from right-bank Kherson Oblast. Putin likely that Putin intended to coopt Kots following that withdrawal.

Putin remains unlikely to persecute Russian milbloggers due to his commitment to continue this war and is likely attempting instead to introduce a culture of self-censorship within the milblogger community. The Kremlin has historically allowed for "domesticated opposition" - or figures who criticized the Russian government for issues such as corruption instead of opposing the nature of the regime – and it is likely that Putin is using a similar approach with controllable milbloggers.[24] Putin is attempting to disincentivize milbloggers from eventually turning on him by integrating them into his circle.

Putin may also attempt to recruit additional milbloggers from other nationalist factions in the information space. Putin's mobilization group notably did not include figures closely affiliated with the Wagner Group or Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and instead targeted a group that has already gained some prominence on Russian state outlets. Putin has notably refrained from giving Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin an official position within the Russian government even though Prigozhin supposedly directly reports on Russia's military failures to Putin and is contributing his forces to Putin's war.[25] Prigozhin remains simply the de facto head of a nominally illegal mercenary group even as milbloggers secure formal, if sometimes ad hoc, official positions.

**Putin's ability to sustain his narrative is vulnerable to his inability to deliver on his maximalist goals and promises in the long run.** Putin and Shoigu assured the collegium that Russia will learn from the mistakes of the "special military operation" and promised to implement several changes to remedy problems within the war effort. Russia, however, is unlikely to efficiently address the fundamental flaws of its military structure—certainly not in any short period of time—and that failure will likely revitalize criticism. Putin will also need to continue to deflect blame from himself for failing to deliver on such promises onto the Russian MoD without destroying the credibility of the MoD and the uniformed military in the eyes of the Russian population. **Putin's consistent appeasement of the milbloggers demonstrates that he recognizes their influence on the Russian people of whom he asks such tremendous sacrifices to sustain his war effort.**

**Putin and Shoigu continued to use descriptions of heightened nuclear readiness to appease domestic nationalist audiences and intimidate Western audiences without enunciating new policies or any fundamental changes in Russia's nuclear posture or capabilities.[26]** Putin stated that Russian forces will continue to develop Russia's nuclear triad as the main guarantor of Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity.[27] Putin and Shoigu claimed that modern weapons compose 91.3% of Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal, that Russian forces are fielding Avangard hypersonic warheads, and that Russian forces will soon introduce Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missiles into active service.[28]

**Such descriptions are extremely unlikely to represent enhanced Russian willingness to use nuclear weapons.** The Kremlin routinely uses nuclear rhetoric to project strength to the far-right Russian community, which has accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of failing to take sufficiently aggressive steps to support the war in Ukraine and to demand that the West reduce its "escalatory" provision of aid to Ukraine and to pursue negotiations on Russian terms by hinting at the possibility of nuclear escalation. ISW has extensively reported on previous incidents in which Russian officials have referred to nuclear weapons to influence Western and domestic audiences and assessed that Russian officials have no intention of actually using nuclear weapons on the battlefield.[29]

**Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky traveled to Washington, DC to meet with US leaders on December 21. This is Zelensky's first trip outside Ukraine since the escalation of Russia's war on February 24.[30]** ISW will report on the details of Zelensky's visit and Russian reactions to the visit on December 22. Russian officials, media sources, and milbloggers have continuously expressed concern over the closeness of the Ukraine-US relationship and demoralization over the effectiveness of US and Western aid to Ukraine. The recent finalization of US plans to provide Patriot missile defense systems to Ukraine sparked a flurry of Russian discussions over the likely significant effects that Patriots will have on the war and the attack opportunities that Russia missed before the US agreed to provide Patriot systems.[31] ISW has noted similar Russian responses to the US provision of HIMARS systems to Ukraine.[32]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu proposed a series of expansive reforms and goals for Russian force generation that Russia is highly unlikely to complete in time to be relevant to the current conflict.
- Putin and Shoigu reiterated maximalist Russian aims for the war in Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin has intensified efforts to make peace with the critical pro-war nationalist community. Russian failures to achieve Putin's stated goals jeopardize Kremlin efforts to regain control over the domestic narrative and to set conditions for the second year of the war.
- Russian nuclear rhetoric is most likely an attempt to appease domestic audiences and intimidate Western audiences and not an indicator of preparation to use nuclear weapons.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky traveled to Washington, DC on December 21. ISW will report on the details of Zelensky's visit and Russian reactions to the visit on December 22.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Donetsk City areas.
- A Ukrainian official confirmed that Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to establish control over the Dnipro delta islands.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu boasted about the growing Russian Young Army Cadets National Movement (Yunarmia) movement.
- Russian officials intensified law enforcement crackdowns to deter partisan activities and target partisan sympathizers.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 20, 8 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Intensifying Russian pressure on Belarus is degrading Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's maneuver room to avoid making concessions to the Kremlin.** Russian President Vladimir Putin's long game to reestablish suzerainty over Belarus is making progress separate and apart from Putin's efforts to get Belarus more actively involved in his invasion of Ukraine. Lukashenko confirmed that Russia "gave" Belarus an unspecified number of S-400 air defense systems during his meeting with Putin in Minsk on December 19, confirming ISW's 2021 forecast that Russian-made S-400 systems would begin operating in Belarus.<sup>[1]</sup> Lukashenko had previously rejected S-400 systems operating in Belarus in 2020.<sup>[2]</sup> Lukashenko is likely delaying acceding to Putin's larger demands - such as committing Belarusian forces to join the invasion against Ukraine - by making smaller concessions that he has stonewalled for years.

Russian military personnel will likely operate the Belarus-based S-400 systems. Russian personnel may operate the S-400 systems from the so-called joint Russian-Belarusian Air Force and Air Defense Forces training center in Grodno, Belarus – a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus that the Kremlin established in the spring of 2021.<sup>[3]</sup>

**ISW continues to observe indicators consistent with the most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) of a renewed Russian invasion of northern Ukraine from Belarus.**<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian military officials continue to warn about a growing Russian threat from Belarus. Ukrainian Joint Forces Commander Serhiy Nayev stated on December 20 that Russian elements in Belarus have military potential "currently sufficient" to create an unspecified threat to Ukraine and that these elements can conduct unspecified "tactical actions."<sup>[5]</sup> Nayev's statement marks an inflection in Ukrainian officials' characterization of the growing Russian forces in Belarus; previous Ukrainian descriptions of Russian forces in Belarus did not ascribe to them tactically significant capacities.<sup>[6]</sup> Independent Belarusian sources continue to report growing Russian mechanized forces in Belarus.<sup>[7]</sup> About 30 Russian T-80 tanks were reportedly deployed to Belarus around December 20.<sup>[8]</sup>

These indicators support the MDCOA forecast, but that course of action remains unlikely at this time. A Russian invasion of northern Ukraine from Belarus is not very likely imminent. Nayev reiterated that Ukraine's defense is prepared to defend northern Ukraine.<sup>[9]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reiterated

that it has not observed Russian forces forming strike groups in Belarus as of December 20.[10] ISW will continue to monitor the situation.

**Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's frontline visit to Bakhmut on the 300th day of war is undermining an ongoing Kremlin information operation intended to present Russian President Vladimir Putin as an involved war leader.** Zelensky made a surprise visit to Ukrainian troops serving on the intense Bakhmut front on December 20 and presented awards.[11] In contrast, Putin held a senior-level award ceremony where he celebrated Russian occupation and Kremlin officials such as proxy leaders from occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts, Russian propagandist and RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan, and Russian milblogger Semyon Pegov among other state officials.[12] ISW has previously assessed that Putin has intensified his efforts to extricate himself and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) from persistent criticism by making public appearances relating to various undertakings aimed at improving the Russian war effort. This award ceremony further indicates Putin's fixation with presenting himself as an involved wartime leader. [13] Putin likely seeks to deflect blame for Russian military failures in Ukraine by maintaining a façade that paints Putin in a positive light but absolves him of responsibility for the war.

Putin's decision to award members of his circle who have not even been directly involved in fighting in contrast with Zelensky's visit near the front lines in Bakhmut sparked some criticism among Russian nationalist voices. A former Russian militant commander and critical voice in the Russian information space, Igor Girkin, noted that Putin is awarding "his heroes in the Kremlin" but not Russian and proxy servicemen who are engaged in combat on the frontlines.[14] Other milbloggers speculated that the Kremlin made a secretive political decision for a Russian ceasefire, allowing Zelensky to walk around Bakhmut.[15] Another milblogger reiterated that Putin had not visited the occupied territories and stated that Russian forces would not be able to effectively conduct a precision strike in time against Zelensky.[16] Zelensky's visit to Bakhmut upstaged Putin's efforts to establish himself as a wartime commander-in-chief and turned Putin's own information operation into an embarrassment even within parts of the pro-war Russian information space.

**Wagner financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin further undermined Putin, possibly inadvertently, within the Russian information space by attempting to boost his standing against the backdrop of Zelensky's visit to Bakhmut.** Prigozhin published a series of videos claiming he arrived at the frontlines near Bakhmut to speak to Zelensky regarding the control of territories in the area. [17] Prigozhin's "offers" to negotiate with Zelensky are neither serious nor authoritative, since he does not hold any official position in Russia. Prigozhin, however, continues to pose as a prominent political and military figure in Russia. Such farcical comments are likely a response to Zelensky's repeated offers to negotiate directly with Putin after Russia withdraws its forces from Ukraine. Prigozhin's appearance on the frontline further weakens Putin's presentation of himself as a wartime leader, since Putin has not even visited Russian-occupied territories, let alone gone anywhere near the front lines. Social media users additionally exposed that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu did not actually visit the frontlines on December 17 - as he claimed - by geolocating the videos the Russian MoD posted of Shoigu's trip in Armyansk, Crimea.[18] While Prigozhin did not directly criticize Putin for his inability to directly address Zelensky or arrive on the frontlines, his and Zelensky's visits to the frontlines threaten to make Putin's posing as a wartime commander in chief humiliating rather than effective.

**The Kremlin's efforts to improve the reputation of the Russian MoD may have prompted Prigozhin to double down on his efforts to legalize Wagner in Russia.** Russian state media outlet RT – likely affiliated with Wagner - published a 10-minute report on Wagner describing Prigozhin's establishment of the paramilitary organization as an attempt to support "Russian interests" and defend the "Russian world." [19] **Such a portrayal suggests that Prigozhin is trying to rid Wagner of the mercenary stigma and instead re-introduce the group as a legitimate military formation in Russia that supports Russian national interests.** RT also introduced prominent Kremlin officials like the Chairman of the Fair Russia - For Truth Party Sergey Mironov who criticized the Russian government for not seizing the initiative to recognize Wagner troops' "heroism" in Ukraine or granting Wagner official status under Russian law. Private military companies such as Wagner are notably illegal in Russia. The RT report also supported a long-standing ISW assessment that Prigozhin is strategically growing his influence on the Russian internet, noting that the newly-opened Wagner Center in St. Petersburg is a working space for "patriotic" media outlets and bloggers to resist the information war against Russia. Prigozhin will likely continue his efforts to establish himself and his Wagner Group in Russia by promoting himself on Telegram and Wagner-affiliated media, which may further diminish the Kremlin's attempts to minimize criticism of its defense leadership.

**The Kremlin will likely continue efforts to portray Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as effective leaders of the war in Ukraine when Putin holds the Russian MoD board meeting on December 21.** The Kremlin press service announced on December 20 that Putin will hold

an expanded version of the Russian MoD board meeting on December 21, which will reportedly include a summary of the activities of the Russian Armed Forces in 2022 and a setting of tasks for the Russian military in 2023.[20] The Kremlin press service announced that Russian Defense Minister Shoigu will deliver the main report on the progress of the “special military operation” in Ukraine at the meeting.[21] The Kremlin press service stated that the commanders of military districts and services of the Russian Armed Forces, the heads of central military authorities, and representatives of federal executive bodies will attend the expanded meeting.[22] The Kremlin press service also stated that 15,000 Russian military officials will attend the meeting via video conference.[23] **Putin is likely holding a larger-than-usual Russian MoD board meeting to present the Russian military as an organized and formidable fighting force and to demonstrate that his control over that force remains unquestioned despite its pronounced military failures in its invasion of Ukraine.** Shoigu will likely deliver a main report on the war in Ukraine that minimizes the Russian MoD’s responsibility for failures at the front and offers an optimistic forecast for what Russian forces will be able to achieve operationally in Ukraine in 2023. The Kremlin will likely publicize aspects of the event to augment the Kremlin’s continuing efforts to present Putin and the Russian MoD as competent managers of the war in Ukraine and to shield Putin and the Russian MoD from the criticism of the ultra-nationalist pro-war community.[24] The event shows that Putin is taking increasing pains to surround himself with military uniforms, possibly hoping to evoke recollections of Joseph Stalin engaging with the Soviet STAVKA during World War II and to separate himself from the famous pictures of Putin separated by a very long table from Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian pressure against Belarus is degrading Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s maneuver room to avoid making concessions to the Kremlin.
- ISW continues to observe indicators consistent with the least likely but most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) of a renewed Russian invasion of northern Ukraine from Belarus.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s visit to Bakhmut undermines an ongoing Kremlin information operation to present Russian President Vladimir Putin as an involved war leader.
- Wagner financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin undercut Putin’s efforts to portray himself as a wartime leader within the Russian information space, possibly inadvertently.
- The Kremlin’s efforts to improve the reputation of the Russian MoD may have prompted Prigozhin to increase his efforts to legalize Wagner Group in Russia.
- The Kremlin will likely continue efforts to portray Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as effective leaders when Putin holds an expanded annual Russian MoD board meeting on December 21.
- Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas.
- Russian forces are expanding defensive fortifications on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- A Kremlin official deflected questioning surrounding a Moscow Oblast military recruitment officer’s December 17 claim that Russian authorities will extend the service period for conscript soldiers.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded that Russian security services intensify their efforts to counter pro-Ukrainian partisan activity.

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#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 19, 9:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko likely deflected Russian President Vladimir Putin's efforts to coerce Belarus into further Russian-Belarusian integration concessions during a meeting in Minsk on December 19.** Putin and Lukashenko refrained from publicly discussing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with both leaders noting that Belarus still faces a Western threat.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin announced that he may consider training Belarusian combat aviation crews for the use of "munitions with special warheads" due to the "escalating" situation on the Union State's external borders.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that Lukashenko uses the rhetoric of defending Belarusian borders against the West and NATO in an effort to avoid participating in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Lukashenko had also used similar hints about the possible deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus on February 17 in the context of claimed Western aggression.<sup>[4]</sup> Lukashenko noted that Russia will deliver S-400 air defense complexes and Iskander complexes, while Putin stated that both leaders discussed the formation of a united defense space.<sup>[5]</sup> ISW continues to assess that Belarus' participation in Putin's war against Ukraine remains unlikely. The fact that Putin appears to have accepted Lukashenko's talking points without persuading Lukashenko to adjust them indirectly supports this assessment. Lukashenko would likely adjust his rhetoric to create some plausible explanation to his own people about why he was suddenly turning away from the fictitious NATO invasion threat he has manufactured to join Putin's disastrous invasion of Ukraine.

**The Kremlin has also attempted to conceal Putin's likely original intentions to pressure Lukashenko into further concessions regarding integration with the Russian Federation.** Putin notably stated that "Russia is not interested in absorbing anyone," when referring to Belarus.<sup>[6]</sup> This statement followed Lukashenko's reiteration of Belarusian independence and full sovereignty on December 16 and appears to be a defensive reaction to Lukashenko's comments.<sup>[7]</sup> Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov also stated that Putin did not go to Belarus to convince Lukashenko to join the war, noting that such speculations are unfounded and "foolish."<sup>[8]</sup> Peskov had avidly denied Putin's intention to invade Ukraine days before the start of offensive operation in a similar fashion, to be sure, but this denial is more likely an attempt to cover up Putin's desperation to involve Lukashenko in the war and apparent failure—again—to do so.

**Russian forces targeted Kyiv with Shahed-131 and -136 kamikaze drone strikes overnight on December 18–19.** Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 30 Russian Shahed drones, including 10 over southern Ukraine and 18 over Kyiv.<sup>[9]</sup> Kyiv City Military Administration Head Serhiy Popko stated that Russian strikes did manage to hit an unspecified infrastructure object in Kyiv, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian strikes targeted energy infrastructure.<sup>[10]</sup> Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov assessed that Russian forces have enough missiles left to conduct three or four more rounds of strikes and then would have to acquire more missiles from Iran, which Ukraine would struggle to defend against; but he noted that Ukrainian forces know how to defend against Shahed kamikaze drones.<sup>[11]</sup> Russian milbloggers continued to criticize Russian forces for striking operationally insignificant targets that do not forward Russia's military goals in Ukraine.<sup>[12]</sup>

**Igor Girkin, a former Russian militant commander and prominent critical voice in the Russian milblogger information space, shared a Russian volunteer's harsh critique of the Russian military's overall performance in the war on December 19.**<sup>[13]</sup> The volunteer framed his critique around Russian failures to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensives; the circumstances that led to those failures; and Russian leadership, media, and milbloggers' failure to address the situations and decision to focus on false positivity.<sup>[14]</sup> Girkin himself has been a profound critic of the Kremlin and Russia's military failures, especially following his claimed two-month stint fighting in Ukraine, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[15]</sup> The volunteer forecasted that Russian forces will have to surrender more cities and even full oblasts to Ukraine as they will be unable to defend against a possible winter counteroffensive, and Girkin's amplification of such a forecast suggests he may agree with it. Girkin's own extremely pessimistic forecasts have been surprisingly accurate, including his critiques of the failure to effectively generate Russian military volunteers in May that has carried over to current mobilization efforts, of the disproportionately high Russian price paid for the limited gain of the capture of Lysychansk in July, and of Russian logistics lines' continued vulnerability to HIMARS strikes across the theater.<sup>[16]</sup> Other prominent Russian milbloggers largely ignored the rant that Girkin amplified on December 19 (unlike Girkin's own December 6 rant following his return to Russia and Telegram), instead continuing to report on Russian activity around Bakhmut in the same performative nature that portrays operationally insignificant gains as huge victories—a framing that the volunteer's rant spent hundreds of words condemning.<sup>[17]</sup>

**The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) is reportedly clashing with other pro-Russian authorities about basic administrative functions, suggesting a lack of cohesion between occupation administrations throughout various areas of occupied Ukraine.** Russian-backed Crimean chairman of the Association of Freight Carriers and Freight Forwarders, Anatoly Tsurkin, posted a public appeal to DNR Head Denis Pushilin on December 18 calling for Pushilin to regulate the "illegal,

groundless actions that are carried out on the territory of the DNR” by employees of various DNR military, administrative, law enforcement, and bureaucratic organs.[18] Tsurkin claimed that DNR employees in the areas of Nikolske and Manhush (transport hubs west of Mariupol that have access to the M14 Mariupol-Berdiansk-Melitopol highway that leads to the E105 Melitopol-Dzankoi highway that links occupied Zaporizhia Oblast with occupied Crimea) are detaining trucks traveling from Crimea for no special reason and with tenuous justifications in order to confiscate drivers’ personal documents and illegally confiscate cars.[19] Tsurkin’s complaints likely come partially as a result of increased pressure on Russian authorities to find alternative logistics routes from Russia to Crimea due to damage to the Kerch Strait Bridge. They are additionally emblematic of growing friction between the DNR and other Russian-affiliated factions, on which ISW has previously reported.[20] The lack of administrative cohesion in Pushilin’s regime is apparently being ill-received by other Russian and Russian-backed authorities, which broadly suggests that Pushilin is not communicating effectively with other occupation organs and therefore complicating logistics between the DNR and other occupied territories.

**The Wagner Group has likely built its offensive model around tactical brutality in order to accommodate for and take advantage of its base of poorly trained and recently recruited convicts.** The UK Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on December 19 that the Wagner Group is continuing to play a major role in attriting Ukrainian forces around Bakhmut and that the group has developed its distinct set of tactics around the fact that its recruit base is primarily composed of former convicts with little to no training.[21] UK MoD noted that Wagner Group command takes advantage of the tendency of recruits to engage in brutal behavior because it protects high-value leadership assets at the expense of low-value recruits.[22] ISW has extensively reported on the fact that the Wagner Group uses convicts to build out its fighting force and that Wagner Group forces are serving a largely attritional role in operations near Bakhmut, failing to take significant ground but effectively pinning Ukrainian forces in the defense of surrounding territory.[23]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko likely deflected Russian President Vladimir Putin’s efforts to coerce Belarus into Russian-Belarusian integration concessions on December 19.
- Russian forces targeted Kyiv with Shahed-131 and 136 kamikaze drone strikes overnight on December 18-19.
- Igor Girkin, a former Russian militant commander and prominent critical voice in the Russian milblogger information space, wrote a harsh critique of the Russian military’s overall performance in the war.
- The Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) reportedly clashed with other Russian occupation authorities regarding basic administration procedures, suggesting tensions between the various occupation administrations in Ukraine.
- The Wagner Group has likely built its offensive model around tactical brutality in order to accommodate for and take advantage of its base of poorly trained and recently recruited convicts.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line as Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces targeted Russian rear positions in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces reportedly lost positions south of Bakhmut on December 18 and continued ground attacks near Bakhmut and Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces are pulling back some elements from areas along the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continued efforts to establish the Wagner Group as a legitimate parastatal organization by petitioning notoriously nationalist elements in the Kremlin.
- Russian occupation authorities continued to restrict movement within occupied territories and employ societal intimidation tactics.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 18**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 18, 2pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, December 18. This report discusses recent efforts by Russian military leadership to address Russian failures in Ukraine, the planned December 19 meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and continued efforts by Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin to legitimize the Wagner Group and bolster his own reputation.**

**Russian military leadership is engaged in a campaign to present itself as part of an effective wartime apparatus in an effort to address the public perception of Russian failures in Ukraine.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted footage on December 18 reportedly of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on a working trip to the Southern Military District (SMD) and inspecting the Russian force grouping in the combat zone in Ukraine.<sup>[1]</sup> Shoigu reportedly received briefings from field commanders and spoke directly with personnel on the frontline paying “special attention to the organization of comprehensive support for the troops, the conditions for deploying personnel in the field, as well as the work of medical and rear units.”<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian MoD posted footage on December 17 of Shoigu attending a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, and Commander of the Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine Sergei Surovikin to discuss near and mid-term proposals for Russian operations in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Shoigu’s recent engagements suggest that the Russian MoD is attempting to bolster its reputation as an effective military organ in the face of consistent criticism of its conduct of the war by the pro-war community. The recent concerted efforts by Russian military officials to present themselves as actively engaged in planning and controlling the war effort, especially in the absence of tangible military victories in Ukraine, may suggest that Russia is preparing for a renewed offensive against Ukraine in the coming months. **Shoigu’s visit to the SMD—with its focus on sustainment and medical support—is likely part of an effort to show that the military leadership is fixing the Russian military’s devastating failures in those areas that have been the subject of constant angry commentary by milbloggers and protests by soldiers and their families.**

**Putin’s planned December 19 meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is likely part of the same effort to present proactivity as well as an effort to set information conditions for a new phase of the war.** Commander of the Ukrainian Combined Forces Serhiy Nayev commented on the upcoming Putin-Lukashenko meeting and noted that it comes after Putin’s December 17 meeting with the Russian military command to discuss both immediate and mid-term goals for the war.<sup>[4]</sup> Nayev reported that the Ukrainian government believes Putin will discuss the wider involvement of Belarusian forces in further Russian aggression against Ukraine, which is consistent with ISW’s forecast for the meeting.<sup>[5]</sup> Taken in tandem, Putin’s meeting with the Russian command, Shoigu’s purported frontline visit, and the Putin-Lukashenko meeting suggest a new phase in the presentation, planning, and conduct of the war and may presage renewed offensive operations against Ukraine in the coming months.

The capacity of the Russian military, even reinforced by elements of the Belarusian armed forces, to prepare and conduct effective large-scale mechanized offensive operations in the next few months remains questionable, as other analysts have observed.<sup>[6]</sup> The manpower Russia is generating from mobilized reservists and from the annual fall conscription cycle will not be sufficiently trained to conduct rapid and effective mechanized maneuver this fall. Russia’s struggles to keep the forces it currently has fighting in Ukraine equipped with tanks, artillery, long-range strike, and other essential materiel are very unlikely to be resolved in time to equip a large new force for offensive operations this winter. Putin may nevertheless order renewed large-scale offensive operations later this winter, but it is important not to overestimate the likely capabilities of Russian or combined Russo-Belarusian forces to conduct them successfully. ISW continues to assess that it is unlikely that Lukashenko will commit the Belarusian military (which would also have to be re-equipped) to the invasion of Ukraine.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued efforts to legitimize the Wagner Group as a parastatal armed force and increase his own power base by lobbying for increased state benefits for Wagner Group personnel who fought in Ukraine.** Prigozhin complained on December 18 that the local St. Petersburg authorities refused to bury a Wagner Group fighter in burial grounds for participants of the “special operation” and instead intend to relegate private military company (PMC) fighters to a separate section, which Prigozhin called humiliating.<sup>[7]</sup> Prigozhin released a letter appealing to Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairperson Andrey Kartapolov to extend combat veteran status to Wagner Group fighters.<sup>[8]</sup> Some Russian milbloggers expressed support for this measure, claiming that any Russian citizen who fights and dies in Ukraine deserves to be buried with full military honors.<sup>[9]</sup> Prigozhin’s appeal does not include fighters of other PMCs, however.<sup>[10]</sup> Prigozhin previously expressed his support for a similar measure on November 8 when the State Duma considered and passed a bill extending combat veteran status to Russian military volunteers.<sup>[11]</sup> Prigozhin has notably feuded with Russian regional authorities in Belgorod Oblast and St. Petersburg, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[12]</sup>

Prigozhin's bid for increased recognition comes as reports of systematic executions within Wagner forces emerge, suggesting that Wagner leadership is willing to go to great lengths to preserve the Wagner Group's image as a highly disciplined force.<sup>[13]</sup> Russian opposition outlet *The Insider* reported on December 16 that Wagner forces routinely execute deserters and those who refuse to fight, especially those recruited from penal colonies.<sup>[14]</sup> *The Insider* reported that Wagner has its own internal security forces to conduct the executions and that one commander—who commanded executed POW Yevgeny Nuzhin—personally witnessed several executions.<sup>[15]</sup> Prigozhin previously expressed public support for Nuzhin's execution, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[16]</sup> Such reports also indicate that Wagner Group forces struggle with morale and discipline issues among new recruits similar to those of conventional Russian forces but combat it with harsh punishments rather than the obfuscation and attempts to appease dissatisfied recruits that characterize the Russian MoD's general approach.

**Key inflections in ongoing military operations on December 18:**

- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Andriy Yusov reported that the Russian military received a new batch of Iranian-made drones and continues to negotiate with Iran on the acquisition of ballistic missile systems.<sup>[17]</sup>
- Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that positional fighting continued along the Svatove-Kremminia line.<sup>[18]</sup>
- Ukrainian and Russian sources reported ongoing fighting in the outskirts of Bakhmut and to the northeast and south of the city.<sup>[19]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces captured Yakovlivka, Donetsk Oblast, northeast of Soledar.<sup>[20]</sup>
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces dislodged Russian forces from long-held positions near Bakhmut.<sup>[21]</sup>
- A Ukrainian official stated that Russian forces are redeploying units from the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast and that it is too early to tell whether Russian forces are withdrawing.<sup>[22]</sup> Russian and Ukrainian forces continued routine artillery and rocket strikes across the Dnipro River.<sup>[23]</sup>
- The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces struck two Russian force concentrations and two ammunition depots in Zaporizhia Oblast on December 16, injuring 150 personnel and destroying 10 pieces of equipment.<sup>[24]</sup> Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov stated that Russian forces are placing dragon's teeth anti-tank defenses in Melitopol.<sup>[25]</sup>
- Russian forces and occupation authorities continue to struggle to address a severe shortage of medical personnel and supplies.<sup>[26]</sup>

**Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 17**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 17, 5:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin is likely attempting to depict Russian President Vladimir Putin as a competent wartime leader and to rehabilitate the image of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) by publicizing Putin's meeting with the joint headquarters of the Russian Armed Forces. The Kremlin announced on December 17 that Putin worked at the joint headquarters of the services of the Russian Armed Forces throughout the day, heard reports on the progress of the "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine, and held a meeting with the joint headquarters and a separate meeting with commanders.<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian MoD and media published footage of the meeting with the joint headquarters that showed that Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Army General Valery Gerasimov, Russian Defense Minister Army General Sergei Shoigu, and the Commander of the Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergei Surovikin were in attendance.<sup>[2]</sup> Images and video of the event provided by the Russian MoD preclude the identification of other notable officers (such as military district or army commanders) present, however. The Kremlin likely publicized the meeting to present Putin as being thoroughly engaged with the planning and execution of the war in Ukraine following recent prominent criticism of his role in leading the war effort by figures in the ultra-nationalist pro-war community.<sup>[3]</sup> One prominent milblogger even questioned whether "Putin finally showed public interest in the special military operation" at their suggestion to do so.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Kremlin also likely publicized Putin's meeting with the joint headquarters to rehabilitate the image of the Russian MoD in response to the pro-war community's routine criticism of the Russian MoD. The Kremlin likely consciously publicized Gerasimov's, Shoigu's, and Surovikin's attendance at the meeting with Putin to present the Russian MoD as an organized, unified, and effective war-fighting institution and to shield the top commanders of the Russian Armed Forces from further criticism. The Russian MoD has taken great care in the past months to affirm Gerasimov's continued role as Chief of the General Staff for a similar reason- in the absence of tangible Russian victories against Ukraine, Russian military leadership seeks to present a picture of a functional and seamless chain of military command.<sup>[5]</sup> The Kremlin is likely attempting to rehabilitate the image of the Russian MoD to counterbalance the growing influence of pro-war ultra-nationalist figures, primarily that of Chechen Republic head Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, and their parallel military structures. The Kremlin will likely continue to attempt to shield the Russian MoD from criticism while still facilitating the growing influence of these ultra-nationalist pro-war figures. This effort is unsustainable and will likely continue to generate conflict between the Russian MoD and the ultra-nationalist pro-war community.

**The Kremlin likely aims to portray Putin as a leader in touch with the Russian people by publicizing Putin's participation in meaningless events like the grand opening of a turkey farm.** Independent Russian news outlet *The Moscow Times* reported that the Kremlin has instructed leaders of certain state-owned corporations and regional governors to prepare a "positive agenda" of news and events in which Putin can participate.<sup>[6]</sup> *The Moscow Times* noted that Putin's calendar already includes small events, such as the grand opening of a turkey breeding center, commemorating the anniversaries of state corporations, and reopening a repaired highway.<sup>[7]</sup> *The Moscow Times* cited Kremlin officials who said that the social well-being of the Russian people is declining while war fatigue is growing and that Putin needs to be seen as a "herald of good news."<sup>[8]</sup> Such efforts likely aim to remind the Russian people that Putin is not just a military leader in wartime but also a civilian leader with close ties to the people. However, amplifying pithy events while canceling opportunities for the public to meaningfully engage with Putin on the state of the war and the country will not likely meaningfully improve Putin's image, and, as ISW previously assessed, may undermine Putin's populist appeal.<sup>[9]</sup> Russian pro-war nationalists have recently criticized the Russian MoD for similar performative messaging that ignores Russia's wartime realities by branding the MoD with the epithet "Russian Ministry of Camouflage Selfies," as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[10]</sup>

**A New York Times (NYT) investigation of Russian military documents supports ISW's longstanding assessments about how flawed Russian planning assumptions and campaign design decisions plagued Russia's invasion of Ukraine from its onset.** ISW has long assessed that faulty Russian planning assumptions, campaign design decisions, and Russian violations of Russia's own military doctrine undermined Russian operations. The NYT acquired and published logbooks, timetables, orders, and other documents of elements of the 76th Airborne Division and 1st Guards Tank Army related to the early days of the war on December 16.<sup>[11]</sup> The documents demonstrate that Russian military planners expected Russian units to be able to capture significant Ukrainian territory with little to no Ukrainian military opposition. The documents indicate that elements of the 76th Airborne Division and Eastern Military District were ordered to depart Belarus and reach Kyiv within 18 hours against little resistance; Russian planners placed OMON riot police and SOBR Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) special police elements (essentially a Russian SWAT equivalent) within the first column of a maneuver element of the 104th Air Assault Regiment of the 76th Airborne Division.<sup>[12]</sup> Riot police are not suitable lead elements for a large maneuver force in a conventional force-on-force war because they are not trained to conduct combined arms or mechanized warfare. The decision to place riot police in the lead column is a violation of Russian (or any normal) doctrine and indicates that Russian planners did not expect significant organized Ukrainian resistance. A separate set of orders indicates that Russian planners expected unsupported elements of the Russian 26th Tank Regiment (of the 47th Tank Division, 1st Guards Tank Army) to conduct a mostly uninhibited, 24-hour dash from Ukraine's border with Russia to a point across the Dnipro River, about 400 kilometers away.<sup>[13]</sup> Ukrainian forces destroyed elements of the 26th Tank Regiment in Kharkiv Oblast, hundreds of kilometers short of its intended destination on March 17.<sup>[14]</sup>

The NYT investigation also supports ISW's assessments that Russian strategic commanders have been micromanaging operational commanders' decisions on tactical matters and that Russian morale is very low. The investigation supported existing reporting that Russian soldiers in Belarus did not know they were going to attack Ukraine until February 23—the day before the invasion—and that some soldiers did not know about the invasion until one hour before the invasion began.<sup>[15]</sup> A retired Russian general told the NYT that the lack of a unified Russian theater command meant there was "no unified planning of actions and command [and control]."<sup>[16]</sup> A Ukrainian pilot told the NYT he was amazed that Russian forces did not conduct a proper air and missile campaign at the beginning of the war to target Ukrainian airfields—as Russian doctrine prescribes. The NYT reported a Russian tank commander deliberately destroyed a Rosgvardia checkpoint in Zaporizhia Oblast over an argument

and that many Russian soldiers sabotaged their own vehicles to avoid combat.[17] The NYT's findings support ISW's assessments and body of research on why the Russian military has been experiencing significant failures since the beginning of the invasion.

**Ongoing Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut are further driving a wedge between forces of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group troops.** DNR Head Denis Pushilin claimed on December 17 that both DNR and Wagner units are closing the "pincers" on Ukrainian troops in Bakhmut.[18] Several milbloggers responded to Pushilin's claim and categorically denied that DNR troops have anything to do with fighting in Bakhmut, emphasizing that offensive efforts in this area are exclusively led by the Wagner Group.[19] The disparities between Pushilin's claims, which represent the official DNR line, and statements made by Prigozhin and other prominent voices in the Russian information space suggest that there is a continued and growing divide between the DNR and the Wagner Group. During battles for settlements south of Bakhmut in October, Prigozhin denied any involvement by DNR or conventional Russian troops in the capture of Ivanhrad.[20] Prigozhin has also previously been remarkably clear-eyed about the slow and grinding pace of Wagner advances in the Bakhmut area, which directly contrasts with exaggerated claims made by Pushilin and other Russian sources.[21] Wagner's role in operations around Bakhmut will likely continue to contribute to divides between various factions in the Russian military and discredit DNR authorities and the forces that they command.

**The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assesses that the Kremlin is not serious about negotiations with Ukraine, agreeing with a longstanding ISW assessment.** CIA Director William Burns told PBS NewsHour on December 16, "Most conflicts end in negotiations, but that requires a seriousness on the part of the Russians in this instance that I don't think we see... it's not our assessment that the Russians are serious at this point about a real negotiation."[22] ISW has consistently assessed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is not interested in negotiating seriously with Ukraine and retains maximalist objectives for the war.[23]

Putin has consistently weaponized invocations of the negotiation process to isolate Ukraine from partner support. Putin has routinely framed Ukraine as refusing concessions and likely seeks to use any ceasefire and negotiation window to allow Russian troops time to reconstitute and relaunch operations, thus depriving Ukraine of the initiative. A ceasefire agreement that occurs soon enough to allow Russian forces to rest and refit this winter is extremely unlikely. Russia and Ukraine are currently opposed to one another on the terms of any such agreement, and it is highly unlikely that Russian and Ukrainian officials will agree to a ceasefire, let alone implement one, for some months. Russian forces will likely not have the opportunity to pause Ukrainian winter counter-offensives and reset before spring.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Kremlin is likely attempting to increase perceptions of Putin's competence and of that of the Russian Ministry of Defense by publicizing Putin's meeting with the joint headquarters of the Russian Armed Forces and Putin's appearances at non-military events.
- A *New York Times* investigation of Russian military documents from early in the war supports ISW's longstanding assessments about how flawed Russian planning assumptions and campaign design decisions plagued Russia's invasion of Ukraine from its onset.
- Ongoing Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut are further driving a wedge between forces of the Donetsk People's Republic and Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group troops.
- The US Central Intelligence Agency assesses that the Kremlin is not serious about negotiations with Ukraine, agreeing with a longstanding ISW assessment.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counterattacks near Svatove and Kremenna and continue to strike Russian rear areas.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian officials warned that Russian forces may be attempting to draw Ukrainian forces into a trap on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russia may be conducting an information operation falsely connecting ongoing negotiations on the demilitarization of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to a prospective future Ukrainian counteroffensive in Zaporizhzhia Oblast.
- Several Russian sources denounced a military commissar's claim that Russian authorities will extend the service period for conscript soldiers. An extension of the legal mandatory service period would not be necessary to keep current conscripts in the field,

however, as all former conscripts are reservists, and all reservists are already eligible for mobilization.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 16

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Katherine Lawlor, Layne Phillipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 16, 6:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted their ninth large-scale missile campaign against critical Ukrainian energy infrastructure on December 16 and carried out one of the largest missile attacks on Kyiv to date.** Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valery Zaluzhny stated that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 60 of 76 Russian missiles, of which 72 were cruise missiles of the Kh-101, Kalibr, and Kh-22 types, and four guided missiles of the Kh-59 and Kh-31P types.<sup>[1]</sup> The Kyiv City Military Administration reported that Ukrainian forces destroyed 37 of 40 missiles targeting Kyiv.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian officials also reported that Russian missiles struck nine energy infrastructure facilities and some residential buildings in Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian military officials noted that Russian forces launched most of their missiles from the Black and Caspian seas and the Engels airfield in Saratov Oblast.<sup>[4]</sup> **Russian forces are likely intensifying their strikes on Kyiv to stir up societal discontent in the capital, but these missile attacks are unlikely to break Ukrainian will.**

**Russian strikes continue to pose a significant threat to Ukrainian civilians but are not improving the ability of Russian forces to conduct offensive operations in Ukraine.** Ukraine's state electricity transmission system operator Ukrenergo stated that restoration of electricity may be delayed by the December 16 strikes and announced a state of emergency aimed at electricity market suppliers.<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrenergo added that Ukraine's United Energy System had to cut more than 50% of energy consumption as a result of the strikes.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Russian National Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev made inflammatory but irrelevant comments in support of ongoing information operations that aim to weaken Western support for Ukraine.** Medvedev published on December 16 a list of what he described as legitimate military targets, which included "the armed forces of other countries that have officially entered the war" in Ukraine.<sup>[7]</sup> Medvedev rhetorically questioned whether Western military aid to Ukraine means that NATO members have entered the war against Russia.<sup>[8]</sup> Medvedev did not explicitly state that the armed forces of NATO members are legitimate military targets nor that he was stating an official Russian position on legitimate targets in the war in Ukraine.<sup>[9]</sup> Medvedev likely made the comments in coordination with the large-scale Russian missile strikes in an attempt to weaken Western support for Ukraine by stoking fears of escalation between the West and Russia. Medvedev has previously made purposefully inflammatory comments in support of other information operations with the same aims.<sup>[10]</sup> Medvedev's past and current inflammatory rhetoric continues to be out of touch with actual Kremlin positions regarding the war in Ukraine. Russian forces have and will likely continue to target Western military equipment that Ukrainian forces have deployed in Ukraine, of course, but there is nothing surprising or remarkable in that fact.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely pressure Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for Russian-Belarusian integration concessions at an upcoming December 19 meeting in Minsk—Putin's first meeting with Lukashenko in Minsk since 2019.**<sup>[11]</sup> Lukashenko and Putin reportedly will discuss Russian-Belarusian integration issues, unspecified military-political issues, and implementing Union State programs.<sup>[12]</sup> The Union State is a supranational agreement from 1997 with the stated goal of the federal integration of Russia and Belarus under a joint structure. The Kremlin seeks to use the Union State to establish Russian suzerainty (control) over Belarus.<sup>[13]</sup>

**Lukashenko is already setting information conditions to deflect Russian integration demands as he has done for decades.**<sup>[14]</sup> Lukashenko stressed that "nobody but us is ruling Belarus," and that Belarus is ready to build relations with Russia but that their ties "should always proceed from the premise that we are a sovereign and independent state."<sup>[15]</sup> It is unclear whether Putin will be successful in extracting his desired concessions from Lukashenko. Lukashenko has so far largely resisted intensified Russian integration demands and has refused to commit Belarusian forces to join Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

**Putin's visit to Minsk could indicate that Putin is trying to set conditions for the newly assessed most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) that ISW reported on December 15: a renewed offensive against Ukraine—possibly against northern Ukraine or Kyiv—in winter 2023.** [16] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin signed an unspecified document to further strengthen bilateral security ties—likely in the context of the Russian-Belarusian Union State—and increase Russian pressure on Belarus to further support the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in Minsk on December 3.[17] ISW's December 15 MDCOA warning forecast about a potential Russian offensive against northern Ukraine in winter 2023 remains a worst-case scenario within the forecast cone. ISW currently assesses a Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus as low, but possible. Belarusian forces remain extremely unlikely to invade Ukraine without a Russian strike force. It is far from clear that Lukashenko would commit Belarusian forces to fight in Ukraine even alongside Russian troops. There are still no indicators that Russian forces are forming a strike force in Belarus.[18]

**Putin and Lukashenko's meeting will—at a minimum—advance a separate Russian information operation that seeks to break Ukrainian will and Western willingness to support Ukraine, however.** This meeting will reinforce the Russian information operation designed to convince Ukrainians and Westerners that Russia may attack Ukraine from Belarus. Russia's continued strikes against Kyiv, constant troop deployments to Belarus, and continued bellicose rhetoric are part of (and mutually reinforce) this information operation. The Kremlin is unlikely to break the Ukrainian will to fight. The Kremlin likely seeks to convince the West to accept a false fait accompli that Ukraine cannot materially alter the current front lines and that the war is effectively stalemated. ISW assesses that such a conclusion is inaccurate and that Ukraine stands a good chance of regaining considerable critical terrain in the coming months.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly ignored warnings about worst-case economic scenario assessments from senior Kremlin financial advisors prior to launching his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.** Unnamed sources told the *Financial Times* (FT) that the head of the Russian Central Bank, Elvira Nabiullina, and the head of Sberbank, German Gref, briefed a 39-page assessment to Putin outlining the long-term damage to the Russian economy if Russia recognized the independence of proxy republics in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts a month prior to the full-scale invasion.[19] FT sources noted that both Nabiullina and Gref spoke to Putin of their own initiative but were not brave enough to tell Putin that Russia risked a geopolitical disaster when he interrupted the brief to ask how Russia can prevent a worst-case scenario. Nabiullina and Gref specifically warned Putin that Western sanctions would set the Russian economy back by decades and negatively impact the Russian quality of life. Both Nabiullina and Gref reportedly were shocked when Putin launched the invasion on February 24 and indirectly expressed some discontent to their inner circles, despite implementing provisions to mitigate some negative impacts of sanctions during the first weeks of the war.

The report, if true, indicates that Putin had received some prognosis of the war's risks and costs but decided to ignore them in favor of his maximalist goal of seizing Ukraine. It is unclear if Putin received and subsequently ignored similar reports from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), but his engagement with Nabiullina and Gref shows that he had some awareness of the potential long-term risks of the war. Nabiullina's and Gref's reported hesitance to dissuade Putin also demonstrates the unbalanced power dynamic that may have prompted some Russian officials to play along with Putin's bad decisions rather than remonstrating with him.

**Russia is continuing to endure some economic challenges as a direct result of Putin's war in Ukraine.** FT reported that Nabiullina was able to protect the Russian economy from the worst-case scenario by undertaking provisions such as regulation of the exchange control during the first day of the war, but some war costs are likely catching up to the Kremlin. Russia's Central Bank announced on December 16 that mobilization had sparked increasing manpower shortages across several industries in Russia.[20] The Central Bank report added that Russia has limited possibilities to expand its production as a result of shortages in the state labor market and noted that "unemployment hit a historic low." The costs of Putin's war, including the human and labor cost of his force generation efforts, will continue to have a long-term effect on Russia's economy, as ISW has previously assessed. [21]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces conducted another set of large-scale missile strikes throughout Ukraine and one of the largest missile attacks against Kyiv to date.
- Russian strikes continue to pose a significant threat to Ukrainian civilians despite generating no improvement in the Russian ability to conduct offensive operations.

- Dmitry Medvedev made inflammatory but irrelevant comments in support of ongoing information operations that aim to weaken Western support for Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely pressure Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to support the Russian war in Ukraine further at a December 19 meeting in Minsk.
- Lukashenko is already setting information conditions to deflect Russian integration demands.
- Putin's upcoming visit to Minsk could indicate that he is setting conditions for a new offensive from Belarusian territory.
- Putin and Lukashenko's meeting will likely advance a separate Russian information operation that seeks to break Ukrainian will and Western willingness to support Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly ignored worst-case scenario assessments of potential damage to the Russian economy prior to launching his full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Russia is continuing to face economic challenges as a direct result of the war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted counterattacks in the Svatove and Kremminna areas.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City areas.
- Russian forces continued to undertake defensive measures on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian officials will likely struggle to recruit additional contract servicemembers despite ongoing efforts to do so.
- Russian occupation authorities continued seizing civilian infrastructure to treat wounded Russian servicemen and aid Russian forces operating in occupied territories.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 15, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russia may be setting conditions to conduct a new offensive against Ukraine—possibly against Kyiv—in winter 2023. Such an attack is extraordinarily unlikely to succeed. A Russian attack from Belarus is not imminent at this time.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's objectives in Ukraine have not changed according to Ukrainian officials' and ISW's assessments based on Kremlin statements and actions.** Putin continues to pursue maximalist goals in Ukraine using multiple mechanisms intended to compel Ukrainians to negotiate on Russia's terms and likely make preemptive concessions highly favorable to Russia. This fundamental objective has underpinned the Kremlin's various military, political, economic, and diplomatic efforts over the past 10 months in Ukraine.

Various Ukrainian defense officials continue to assess that Putin maintains maximalist goals and seeks to compel Ukraine to enter negotiations and/or accept a ceasefire to advance Russian objectives. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on December 15 that the ultimate goal of Russia is the "complete conquest and control over Ukraine," and noted that recent Russian information operations have been aimed at compelling Ukraine to enter negotiations with Russia.<sup>[1]</sup> Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, stated that Russia seeks to force Ukraine into negotiations in order to generate a strategic pause that would afford Russian troops time to regroup and regain strength.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valery Zaluzhny emphasized that Russia is seeking to temporarily force Ukraine to agree to stop fighting in order to gather renewed resources and prepare for renewed future offensive operations.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Putin is using two simultaneous military efforts to pursue his ultimate objective of regaining control of Ukraine and securing major territorial concessions.** Russia's current offensive pushes in Donetsk Oblast, particularly around Bakhmut and in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and the ongoing campaign of massive missile strikes on critical Ukrainian infrastructure are intended to create realities on the ground that Russia will likely demand Ukraine recognize as the basis for negotiations. [4] Russian troops have reinforced their efforts throughout Donetsk Oblast with freed-up combat power following the withdrawal from the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast and have been consistently pursuing territorial objectives, albeit unsuccessfully. ISW continues to assess that Putin has given the

order for Russian troops to complete the capture of the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, and that current Russian offensive efforts around Bakhmut, Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast are part of the effort to execute that order. Ukrainian officials reiterated that the immediate focus of Russian efforts is securing territorial gains in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts.<sup>[5]</sup> Putin likely hopes that these offensive operations will threaten Ukraine's ability to further defend territory and cause significant damage to Ukrainian combat power so that Ukraine will have no choice but to negotiate a ceasefire, concede on Russia's terms, and ultimately allow Russian troops the time to reconstitute and relaunch new offensive operations in the future. The massive Russian missile strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure are Putin's second military effort to compel Ukraine to surrender or enter negotiations on Putin's terms. Over the course of the last two months, Russian forces have used missiles and drones to systematically target civilian and energy infrastructure in a way that generates disproportionate psychological impacts but does not achieve significant military objectives.

**These two military efforts are failing to coerce Ukraine into negotiating or offering preemptive concessions, and Ukraine has retained the battlefield initiative following its two successive counteroffensive operations in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts. Putin may therefore be setting conditions for a third, sequential military effort in the likely event that these two efforts fail to secure his objectives by preparing for a renewed offensive against Ukraine in the winter of 2023.** Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valery Zaluzhny suggested that such an offensive could take place as early as January, in the worst-case scenario, and March, in the best case.<sup>[6]</sup> Zaluzhny additionally observed that this new offensive could take the form of another mechanized attack against Kyiv from Belarusian territory.<sup>[7]</sup> As ISW has previously reported, there are a series of observed indicators that suggest that Russian forces may indeed be preparing for a new offensive operation—including the reconsolidation of force compositions along major axes of advance and the movement of heavy equipment to the frontlines.<sup>[8]</sup>

**The winter 2023 timeframe suggested by Ukrainian officials for such a potential offensive is consistent with ISW's long-standing assessment that the winter will facilitate Ukrainian and Russian offensive operations and is consistent with the current projected timeline for the completion of Russian force generation efforts.<sup>[9]</sup>** Putin announced the beginning of mobilization in late September 2022.<sup>[10]</sup> Putin stated that Russia fielded 150,000 mobilized men of the initial 300,000 mobilized recruits in Ukraine on December 7—about two months after beginning mobilization—and that 150,000 mobilized men continue to train in Russia to prepare for deployment.<sup>[11]</sup> The remaining 150,000 mobilized men in training should deploy to Ukraine around February to March 2023 if the training and deployment rate remains uniform and as Putin described. Zaluzhny noted that Russia is currently preparing 200,000 troops for deployment—an expanded estimate which likely incorporates servicemembers from the autumn 2022 conscription cycle who are training alongside the remaining mobilized recruits.<sup>[12]</sup> The combination of ongoing training efforts for both mobilized recruits and the Fall 2022 conscript class, alongside indications that Russia is preparing for another wave of "partial" mobilization, indicate that Russia is trying to generate the combat capability for a renewed offensive in the early months of 2023.<sup>[13]</sup>

**Russian forces may be setting conditions to attack from Belarus, though ISW continues to assess a Russian invasion from Belarus is not imminent at this time.** The Ukrainian General Staff's daily reports from December 1 to 15 uniformly state that Ukrainian officials have not detected Russian forces in Belarus forming strike groups necessary to attack northern Ukraine.<sup>[14]</sup> There are no observed open-source indicators that Russian forces are forming strike groups within Belarus as of December 15. Belarusian forces remain extremely unlikely to invade Ukraine without a Russian strike group.<sup>[15]</sup>

The following indicators support a forecast cone that Russia may be setting conditions to attack Ukraine from Belarus in winter 2023. ISW will continue to monitor the situation and provide updated assessments.

- **Russia's military presence in Belarus has been growing since fall 2022.** Multiple official Ukrainian and independent Belarusian sources have reported a growing Russian military presence in Belarus since October 2022.<sup>[16]</sup> Hromov stated on December 15 that Russia most recently deployed one battalion's worth of tanks to the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest and one battalion's worth of tanks to the Losivdo Training Ground in Vitebsk during the week of December 4-11.<sup>[17]</sup> A senior Ukrainian intelligence official stated on October 24 that Russia deployed about 3,200 personnel to Belarus.<sup>[18]</sup> These numbers alone are not sufficient to support an invasion of Ukraine but could indicate an effort to again accumulate a large Russian force in Belarus.

- **Ukrainian officials claim that Russian forces in Belarus do not have specific plans to return to Russia after completing their training.** Hromov stated that the Russian military has not given Russian trainees in Belarus any indication about their future tasks or whether they will deploy

back to Russia, remain in Belarus, or attack Ukraine.[19] Russian commanders may be keeping options open for a potential attack against Ukraine from Belarus in winter 2023.

- **Senior Ukrainian officials are increasingly warning that Russian forces may attempt to attack Kyiv.** Zaluzhny said that Russian forces may attempt to attack Ukraine from Belarus between January and March 2023 and stated “I have no doubt [Russian forces] will have another go at Kyiv” on December 15.[20] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated on December 13 that Russia may be preparing for a large-scale offensive in January and February 2023.[21]

- **Elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army—in principle the Russian military’s most elite heavy formation that could form the core of a strike force—are reportedly training in Belarus as of December 15.** Hromov stated that elements of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army are training in Belarus.[22] All maneuver elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army have taken heavy losses near Kharkiv, Sumy, and eastern Kyiv Oblast, making its “elite” status and effective combat power even after reconstitution with mobilized reservists and/or conscripts questionable.

**It remains extraordinarily unlikely that Russian forces would be able to take Kyiv even if Russian forces again attack from Belarus again.** Russian forces are extremely unlikely to be more successful at attacking northern Ukraine in the winter of 2023 than they were in February 2022. Russia’s conventional forces are badly degraded and lack the combat power that they had when Russia attempted (and failed) its full-throated effort to capture Kyiv in February 2022. Russian forces have been unable to secure their gains across Ukraine and have lost over 70,000 square km of occupied territory since abandoning Kyiv. Russian forces in Bakhmut currently advance no more than 100-200 meters a day after concentrating their main efforts there.[23] Russia has not established air superiority let alone air supremacy in Ukraine and has largely exhausted its precision-guided munitions arsenal. Ukrainian forces, for their part, have prepared significant defenses in northern Ukraine and are better prepared to defend now than they were in February 2022. The terrain near the Belarusian-Ukrainian border is not conducive to maneuver warfare and possible invasion routes from Belarus to Kyiv run through defensible chokepoints in the Chernobyl exclusion zone that Ukrainian forces now have experience defending.[24]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russia may be setting conditions to conduct a new offensive against Ukraine—possibly against Kyiv—in winter 2023. Such an attack is extraordinarily unlikely to succeed. A Russian attack from Belarus is not imminent at this time.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin’s objectives in Ukraine have not changed.
- Putin is using two simultaneous military efforts to pursue his objective of conquering Ukraine and securing major concessions.
- Putin is likely setting conditions for a renewed offensive before spring of 2023 to coerce Ukraine into offering concessions.
- Russian forces may be setting conditions to attack from Belarusian territory, although ISW continues to assess that the Belarusian military will not join the fighting in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations south of the Dnipro River in southern Ukraine.
- The Russian officer corps continues to suffer heavy losses in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian partisans conducted a sabotage attack on a power transformer substation in Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 14, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's alluded decision to postpone his annual address to the Russian Federation Assembly indicates he remains uncertain of his ability to shape the Russian information space amidst increasing criticism of his conduct of the invasion of Ukraine.** The Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly to the Russian State Duma and Federation Council is an annual speech introduced to the Russian constitution in February 1994, roughly equivalent to the US President's annual State of the Union address. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Putin may deliver his address to the Federation Assembly in 2023 and called on Russians to stop "fortune-telling with coffee grounds" regarding the timing of the next address.<sup>[1]</sup> An unnamed government source told the Russian state newswire TASS that the countdown for the new address starts from the date of the previous address, noting that the address is unlikely to take place in 2022.<sup>[2]</sup> Putin held his last address in late April 2021, discussing his initiatives for the year following the first crisis he caused with the Russian military buildup on the Ukrainian border in early 2021.<sup>[3]</sup>

**The Russian withdrawal from Kyiv Oblast and northern Ukraine in April 2022 likely spoiled Putin's plans to declare victory during the Federation Assembly address.** Putin had previously seized the opportunity in March 2014 to deliver the "Crimean Speech," wherein he announced the illegal annexation of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.<sup>[4]</sup> Putin likely anticipated a similar outcome in early spring only to indefinitely postpone the address, likely as a result of Russian military failures, his announced annexation of territories Russian forces did not control, and public dissatisfaction with mobilization. Putin may be still waiting and hoping to deliver a grandiose victory speech in 2023

or postponing the moment when he will have to admit that Russia cannot achieve his frequently restated maximalist aims in Ukraine.

**Putin may not be confident in his ability to justify the cost of his war upon Russian domestic and global affairs when addressing the Russian public and elites.** The unnamed TASS source noted that the address requires significant preparation by the president and his staff as it normally addresses plans for all aspects of Russian society—economy, education, military, global partnerships, etc. A victory in Ukraine could have allowed Putin to obfuscate Russian human and financial losses as it did in 2014, but Russia has not had any significant victories since the Russian occupation of Lysychansk in early July. Putin had previously attempted to sell the annexation of partially occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts on September 30 as a major victory, only to reportedly generate further grumbling among Russian elites and undermine state propaganda narratives.<sup>[5]</sup> Putin's most recent appearances on December 7 and December 9 offered vague responses to a few concerns over the length of the war, a second mobilization wave, and a claimed Ukrainian threat to Russian territory but also generated some criticism and confusion within the Russian pro-war community.<sup>[6]</sup> The Russian withdrawal from Kherson City had also angered prominent nationalist ideologists who had begun to question Putin's commitment and ability to establish "Greater Russia."<sup>[7]</sup>

**Putin has already canceled his annual press conference with the members of the Russian public, likely in an attempt to avoid answering questions about Russia's military failures without resorting to excessively obvious manipulation of questioners and questions.** Peskov announced on December 12 that Putin will not hold his live press conference with Russians, which he had been hosting for ten years.<sup>[8]</sup> Putin appears to be increasingly turning to scripted and pre-recorded appearances such as his meeting with 18 hand-picked, politically affluent women on November 25 who falsely introduced themselves as mothers of mobilized servicemen.<sup>[9]</sup> Putin is likely attempting to preempt the risks associated with having to respond to a complex question. The cancellation of the press conference, however, may undermine Putin's populist appeal as a ruler in touch with his population.

**Ukrainian officials are forecasting that Russia may attempt to launch a large-scale offensive in the early months of 2023.** Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated on December 13 that indicators such as Russian mobilization efforts, the announcement of conscription, and the movement of heavy weaponry suggest that Russia may be preparing for a large-scale offensive in January and February 2023.<sup>[10]</sup> Kuleba's statement is consistent with ISW's long-standing assessment that the winter months will increase the pace of operations on both sides and that conditions on the ground throughout Ukraine will likely be conducive to offensive operations.<sup>[11]</sup> Russian forces could most readily relaunch offensive operations along two main axes of advance in the coming months—along the Kharkiv-Luhansk border in northeastern Ukraine, or in Donetsk Oblast. Russian troops appear to be moving heavy equipment from rear areas in Luhansk Oblast to areas near the current frontline along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and have reshaped and reconsolidated their force grouping along this line, as ISW has recently reported.<sup>[12]</sup> Ukrainian and Russian sources have recently reported that Russian troops are conducting limited offensive operations along this line, particularly to regain lost positions west of Kremenna.<sup>[13]</sup> A recent drop in temperatures in this area to consistently below-freezing has allowed the ground to solidify, likely setting conditions for increasing the pace of offensive operations.

Russian combat power that was freed up following the withdrawal from the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast has redeployed to various areas in Donbas, reinforced by mobilized reservists. Russian forces may additionally hope to launch an offensive in western Donetsk Oblast to build on marginal advances made in the Vuhledar-Pavlivka area in November.<sup>[14]</sup> ISW continues to assess that Russian forces seek to complete the capture of the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, and potential future offensives in western Donetsk Oblast may be intended to complement ongoing offensive drives on the western outskirts of Donetsk City and around Bakhmut to accomplish this wider territorial objective. However, despite the potential for new offensive operations, ISW continues to assess that Russian combat capability remains degraded and that Russian troops are highly unlikely to be able to take strategically-significant territory in the coming months.

**Ukrainian air defense units shot down all the Shahed drones that Russian forces launched at Ukraine on December 14.** Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 13 Shahed-136 and Shahed-131 drones at critical infrastructure facilities in Ukraine, including areas of Kyiv Oblast, and that Ukrainian air defense forces shot down all the drones.<sup>[15]</sup>

**Ukrainian sources reported that 64 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs), including one American civilian, returned to Ukraine on December 14.**<sup>[16]</sup> The Ukrainian Ministry of Reintegration announced the exchange but did not specify how many Russian soldiers were part of the deal.<sup>[17]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) notably has not commented on the exchange as of the time of this publication, which may draw criticism from prominent voices in the Russian milblogger information space who have called for increased transparency from the Russian MoD in its handling of prisoner exchanges.<sup>[18]</sup>

**The Kremlin will likely intensify existing information operations accusing Ukraine's government of oppressing religious liberty in Ukraine.** Prominent Pro-Russian Telegram Channel Readovka made a post to its 1.5 million subscribers claiming that Ukraine's State Security Service (SBU) raided Russian Orthodox churches in nine Ukrainian oblasts and accusing the SBU of conducting arbitrary "terror" searches to detain Russian Orthodox clergy on December 14.

<sup>[19]</sup> This narrative contains elements of several observed Russian information operations designed to falsely portray Ukraine as oppressing Russian religious minorities.

Ukraine is not attacking religious liberty or Eastern Orthodoxy. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a decree to impose personal sanctions against representatives of religious organizations associated with the Russian government on December 2.<sup>[20]</sup> This decree targets Kremlin-linked elements of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP). The UOC MP is not an independent religious organization. The UOC MP is the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church's subordinate branch in Ukraine.<sup>[21]</sup> The UOC MP materially supported Russia's annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and continues to support Russia's current invasion.<sup>[22]</sup> Ukrainian authorities convicted a Moscow Patriarchate priest in Severodonetsk, Luhansk Oblast, for providing information about Ukrainian forces to Russian forces since April 2022, for example.<sup>[23]</sup>

The UOC MP is not the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, despite some inaccurate Western reporting characterizing it as "the Ukrainian Orthodox Church."<sup>[24]</sup> The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is a separate entity that gained autocephaly (official independence) from the Moscow Patriarchate in 2019.<sup>[25]</sup> The UOC MP is a small element within Ukraine's religious demography. Multiple surveys conducted in 2022 found that only four percent of Ukrainians identify as members of the Moscow Patriarchate, whereas over 50 percent of Ukrainians identify as members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.<sup>[26]</sup> More than double of the UOC MP's current adherents identified as Greek Catholics (8.8 percent) in 2021.<sup>[27]</sup>

**The Kremlin will likely intensify information operations accusing Ukraine of attacking freedom of the press within the next three months.** Ukraine's parliament passed a media law on December 13 to satisfy a European Union membership prerequisite.<sup>[28]</sup> This law expands the powers of Ukrainian state censors over media organizations—including online media, forbids spreading Russian propaganda or information that disparages the Ukrainian language or defends the Soviet regime that ruled from 1917-1991, and establishes regulatory ratios for Ukrainian-language content versus Russian-language content on radio stations. These policies do not outlaw Russian-language media or the use of the Russian language in Ukraine but take steps to preserve the use of the Ukrainian language against the Kremlin's campaign of cultural genocide that seeks to eradicate the notion of a unique Ukrainian cultural identity.<sup>[29]</sup> The Kremlin intensified information operations that Ukraine attacked freedom of the press in early 2021 after Ukraine banned three prominent pro-Russian television channels linked to key Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk.<sup>[30]</sup> Ukraine's new media law will enter into force three months after its ratification.<sup>[31]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly postponed his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly, indicating that the Kremlin is not confident that it can continue to shape the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian officials are forecasting that Russian forces may attempt to launch a large-scale offensive at the beginning of 2023.
- Ukrainian air defenses shot down all drones that Russian forces launched in attacks on December 14.
- Ukrainian sources reported that 64 POWs returned to Ukrainian-held territory.
- The Kremlin will likely intensify information operations aimed at presenting the Ukrainian government as oppressing religious liberties and freedom of the press.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and Russian forces conducted counterattacks in the Svatove and Kremenna areas.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations south of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Kremlin officials admitted to receiving complaints about mobilization despite mobilization's "*de facto* end."
- Ukrainian partisans continue to aid Ukrainian forces in identifying valuable Russian targets.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 13**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

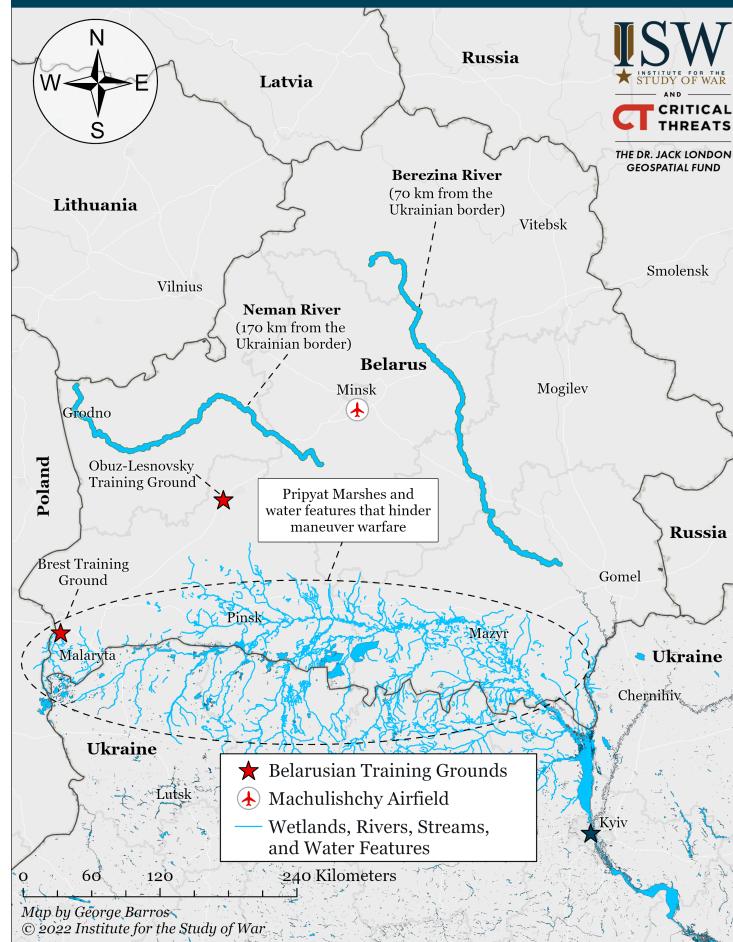
Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 13, 6:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Belarusian forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine despite a snap Belarusian military readiness check on December 13.** Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko ordered a snap comprehensive readiness check of the Belarusian military on December 13. The exercise does not appear to be cover for concentrating Belarusian and/or Russian forces near jumping-off positions for an invasion of Ukraine. It involves Belarusian elements deploying to training grounds across Belarus, conducting engineering tasks, and practicing crossing the Neman and Berezina rivers (which are over 170 km and 70 km away from the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, respectively).<sup>[1]</sup> Social media footage posted on December 13 showed a column of likely Belarusian infantry fighting vehicles and trucks reportedly moving from Kolodishchi (just east of Minsk) toward Hatava (6km south of Minsk).<sup>[2]</sup> Belarusian forces reportedly deployed 25 BTR-80s and 30 trucks with personnel toward Malaryta, Brest (about 15 km from Ukraine) on December 13.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian T-80 tanks reportedly deployed from the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, to the Brest Training Ground also in Brest (about 30 km from the Belarusian-Ukrainian Border) around December 12.<sup>[4]</sup> Russia reportedly deployed three MiG-31K interceptors to the Belarusian airfield in Machulishchy on December 13.<sup>[5]</sup> These deployments are likely part of ongoing Russian information operations suggesting that Belarusian conventional ground forces might join Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>[6]</sup> ISW has written at length about why Belarus is extraordinarily unlikely to invade Ukraine in the foreseeable future.<sup>[7]</sup>

# Belarusian Snap Readiness Check Reference Map for ISW December 13, 2022, Operations Assessment



**Ukrainian officials continue to assess that Belarus is unlikely to attack Ukraine as of December 13.** The Ukrainian General Staff reiterated on December 13 that the situation in northern Ukraine near Belarus has not significantly changed and that Ukrainian authorities still have not detected Russian forces forming strike groups in Belarus.<sup>[8]</sup> The Ukrainian State Border Guard Service reported that the situation on the border with Belarus is under control despite recent Belarusian readiness checks.<sup>[9]</sup>

**Russian milbloggers accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of engaging in performative "excessive reporting" instead of addressing systemic issues with the Russian military and Russian operations in Ukraine.** A prominent Russian milblogger discussed the "vicious practice of photo reports" in the Russian military and noted that Russian soldiers are often made to dress in statutory uniforms and appear on camera to propagate a sense of preparedness and professionalism instead of actually preparing for combat missions.<sup>[10]</sup> The milblogger emphasized that such demonstrations are purely theatrical and create a false sense of coherency in the Russian Armed Forces without actually addressing substantive issues with logistics, communications, and basic provision of units.<sup>[11]</sup> Several other milbloggers amplified this discussion and accused Russian authorities of engaging in "excessive reporting" in order to inundate the information space with photo and video artifacts that aim to "justify the existence" of the Russian MoD and create a guise of success for Russian operations in Ukraine.<sup>[12]</sup> One source emphasized its discontent with such "excessive reporting" and called the Russian MoD "the Ministry of Camouflage and Selfies."<sup>[13]</sup> Russian milbloggers continue to leverage their platforms and notoriety to launch nuanced critiques at the Russian MoD in a way that continues to indicate a growing rift between the bureaucratic practices of the MoD and the realities faced by Russian soldiers on the ground and reported on by a slate of Russian military correspondents. Such discourse allows prominent voices in the nationalist information space to advocate for substantive change while undermining the MoD establishment.

**Senior Israeli officials stated that Iran seeks to limit the range of missiles it plans to provide Russia.** Axios reported on December 12 that Iran fears international backlash from providing Russia

with long range missiles to use in the war in Ukraine and noted that United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2231 passed in 2015 prevents the transfer or receipt of Iranian ballistic missiles with a range over 300 kilometers and a payload over 500 kilograms until October 2023. [14] Axios noted that violating this resolution could result in a "snapback" mechanism that reimposes UN sanctions against Iran.[15]

**Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian forces are striking Ukraine with missiles that Ukraine transferred to Russia in the 1990s as part of an international agreement that Russia explicitly violated by invading Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.** In a comment to *The New York Times* Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skibitsky said that Russian forces are using ballistic missiles and Tu-160 and Tu-95 strategic bombers that Ukraine transferred to Russia as part of the Budapest Memorandum, whereby Ukraine transferred its nuclear arsenal to Russia for decommissioning.[16] Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom committed in return to "respect the independence and sovereignty and existing borders of Ukraine." This agreement has generated some debate about whether or not it committed the United States and the United Kingdom to defend Ukraine, which it did not do. There can be no debate, however, that by this agreement Russia explicitly recognized that Crimea and areas of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts it occupied in 2014 were parts of Ukraine. By that agreement Russia also committed "to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine," among many other provisions that Russia has violated. Skibitsky noted that Russia has removed the nuclear warhead from these decommissioned Kh-55 subsonic cruise missiles, which are now being used to launch massive missile strikes on Ukraine.[17]

**US officials stated on December 13 that the Pentagon is finalizing plans to send Patriot missile defense systems to Ukraine.** The US officials expect to receive the necessary approvals from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and President Joe Biden, and the Pentagon could make a formal announcement as early as December 15.[18] CNN reported that it is unclear how many Patriot missile systems the Pentagon plan would provide Ukraine, but that a typical Patriot battery includes up to eight launchers with a capacity of four ready-to-fire missiles each, radar targeting systems, computers, power generators, and an engagement control station.[19]

**Russia continues to use concepts of terrorism as a legal framework for domestic repression.** Independent Russian outlet *Meduza* noted on December 13 that Russia has been expanding the concept of terrorism under Russian legislation over the course of the last two decades, and as recently as December of this year the State Duma proposed new amendments to the Russian Criminal Code that equate sabotage with an act of terrorism.[20] *Meduza* amplified an investigation by another independent Russian outlet, *Novaya Gazeta*, that noted that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) has transitioned from focusing on defining Islamist militant activity in the Caucasus as terrorism to orienting terrorism around the concept of Ukrainian "saboteurs".[21] FSB Head Alexander Bortnikov relatedly claimed on December 13 that there has been an increase in "terrorist" activity within Russia in 2022, which he related to Ukrainian Security Services (SBU) supposedly operating with Western support.[22] Russian authorities seem to be weaponizing the backdrop of the war in Ukraine to justify expansions of terrorism legislation under the guise of protecting domestic security. Such measures likely afford Russian security authorities greater latitude in cracking down on domestic dissent. As ISW has previously reported, Russian authorities have taken similar steps to use legal frameworks to broadly define individuals and actions as dangerous to Russian security and have recently proposed new bills on expanding the definition of "foreign agents" and the punishment for crimes considered to be sabotage.[23]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Belarusian forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine despite a snap Belarusian military readiness check on December 13.
- Ukrainian officials continue to assess that Belarus is unlikely to attack Ukraine as of December 13.
- Senior Israeli officials stated that Iran seeks to limit the range of missiles it plans to provide to Russia in order to avoid triggering UN "snapback" sanctions.
- Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian forces are striking Ukraine with missiles that Ukraine transferred to Russia in the 1990s as part of an international agreement by which Russia recognized Crimea and all of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts as part of Ukraine and committed not to threaten or attack Ukraine.
- US officials stated on December 13 that the Pentagon is finalizing plans to send Patriot missile defense systems to Ukraine.

- Russia continues to use concepts of terrorism as a legal framework for domestic repression.
- Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks near Svatove and Kremminna.
- Russian forces made marginal advances within Bakhmut and continued ground assaults near Avdiivka and Vuhledar.
- Russian forces may be withdrawing from certain areas south of the Dnipro River as they continue fortifying rear positions in occupied Kherson Oblast.
- Likely Ukrainian actors downed a bridge in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast amid increased reports of Ukrainian strikes against Russian military assets near Melitopol within the past few days.
- The Wagner Group is continuing efforts to use recruits from Russian prisoners to generate combat power.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 12, 7 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces are continuing to shape and consolidate their force composition in eastern Ukraine to bolster defenses against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives near the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and support limited offensive efforts in Donetsk Oblast. An independent Ukrainian analytical organization, the Center for Defense Strategies, noted on December 12 that the Russians are centralizing and systematizing the command and control of Western Military District (WMD) troops in the Kharkiv-Luhansk direction.<sup>[1]</sup> The Center noted that the 20th Combined Arms Army of the WMD is currently operating in this area in three general groupings: elements of the 144th Motorized Rifle Division near Svatove; elements of the 3rd Motorized Rifle Division on the Kremminna-Rubizhne line; and elements of the 18th Motorized Rifle Division of the 11th Army Corps in northwestern Luhansk Oblast near Troitske.<sup>[2]</sup> The Center also reported that elements of the 1st and 2nd Army Corps (troops of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, respectively), 76th Air Assault Division and 106th Airborne Division, and up to three BARS (Combat Reserve) detachments, amounting up to 15 to 17 battalions, are concentrated in this general area.<sup>[3]</sup> These troop concentrations are likely significantly degraded and understrength.

ISW has previously observed WMD elements operating throughout Kharkiv Oblast prior to the sweeping Ukrainian counteroffensives in September that ultimately drove Russian troops back to the current line along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian and Ukrainian reporting has additionally suggested that there is a high concentration of mobilized personnel operating on this axis, likely in order to fill gaps in WMD units that have been degraded over the course of ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives in northeastern Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> BARS-13 and BARS-16 detachments have been particularly active along the Svatove-Kremminna line.<sup>[6]</sup> Elements of the Central Military District (CMD) have previously been observed in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area.<sup>[7]</sup> The observation that elements of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) are operating in Luhansk Oblast suggests that they redeployed away from the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast, where ISW previously reported they were operating prior to the massive Russian withdrawal from the right bank.<sup>[8]</sup> The current force composition of the Russian contingent in eastern Kherson is unclear. Elements of the Russian Southern Military District (SMD) likely maintain a presence in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts.<sup>[9]</sup>

Wagner Group fighters, supported by elements of the 1st and 2nd Army Corps, are largely responsible for driving offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast, particularly around Bakhmut and the western outskirts of Donetsk City. ISW has previously reported the role of Wagner Group forces in securing minor gains around Bakhmut over the last few months.<sup>[10]</sup> Troops of the 6th Regiment of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) 2nd Army Corps have been active northeast of Bakhmut in the Soledar area.<sup>[11]</sup> ISW has additionally observed the prevalence of groupings of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) 1st Army Corps in the Donetsk City–Avdiivka area, particularly the "Sparta" and "Somalia" battalions, which have claimed gains along the western outskirts of Donetsk City in areas such as Pisky, Vodianie, and Marinka. DNR elements have notably been active in this area since 2014. Russian sources reported that DNR troops, elements of the Russian Eastern Military District (EMD), and the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade and 40th Separate Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet

were responsible for costly offensive operations southwest of Donetsk City in the Vuhledar-Pavlivka area in November.[12]

**The cost of the Russian war in Ukraine will likely continue to undermine Russian President Vladimir Putin's geopolitical campaigns worldwide.** The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on December 11 that Putin signed a law allocating over nine trillion rubles (approximately \$143 billion) for defense, security, and law enforcement for the 2023 budget. That amount is about 8 percent of Russia's 2021 gross domestic product according to the World Bank.[13] The UK MoD assessed that Russia's defense spending significantly increased and will represent over 30% of Russia's entire 2023 budget.[14] Putin is thus continuing to drain his budget into his war in Ukraine and may need to defund other international or domestic campaigns in the process. ISW has long assessed that Russian forces have been moving equipment and personnel from other conflict zones such as Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh and may deprioritize other combat and soft-power engagements in favor of sustaining a protracted war in Ukraine.[15]

Putin is seemingly still unwilling to sacrifice his geopolitical initiatives in the short-term, however, and risks facing a financial predicament in which he will not be able to balance maximalist goals in Ukraine with his global power projection campaigns. Putin, for example, has continued attempts to reestablish Russia's position in Central Asia by unsuccessfully proposing to create a trilateral union among Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in late November and during a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on December 9.[16] Putin's continued spending on regional soft-power initiatives has already upset a few prominent pro-war milbloggers, who had criticized the Kremlin for reportedly allocating almost six billion rubles (about \$95.5 million) for the development of Russian-language schools in Tajikistan while failing to provide for Russian forces on the battlefield. [17] The milbloggers added that the Kremlin is not effectively leveraging its soft power in Tajikistan, which further brings the necessity of such spending into question.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officially denied rumors that Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov has been or soon will be replaced, although it stopped short of offering the kind of credible support for this denial that it has provided that Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu is still on the job.** A prominent Russian media aggregator circulated a claim on December 11 that Gerasimov may soon be replaced.[18] The claim reportedly originated with unidentified Russian milbloggers, and some Russian sources either amplified the claim or cautioned their audiences to not engage with such rumors.[19] The Russian MoD directly denied Gerasimov's resignation or replacement, called the claims a Ukrainian "fake," and provided links to images that supposedly show Gerasimov carrying out official duties over the last few weeks.[20] The Russian MoD has previously displayed similar sensitivity to reports of Gerasimov either resigning or being replaced and directly responded to refute such claims, as ISW reported in July.[21] This concerted effort to prove Gerasimov is still functioning as Chief of the General Staff suggests that Russian MoD is attempting to present Russian military leadership as present and engaged in Russian military affairs and to counteract reports of massive disruptions and incoherencies in Russian command structure due to widespread failures in Ukraine.[22] Despite this apparent interest in maintaining Gerasimov's reputation, the Russian MoD has failed to provide video evidence of his activities, which it has consistently done with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and should be able to do easily for the chief of the general staff.[23]

**Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated that Ukraine intends to continue counteroffensives in winter 2022–2023 after the hard freeze enables maneuver warfare, supporting an ISW assessment.**[24] Reznikov stated on December 11 that Ukraine will resume counteroffensives after the "ground is firmer" during the winter when responding to a question about US Director for National Intelligence (DNI) Avril Haines's forecast that Ukraine is likely to conduct counteroffensives in the spring rather than the winter.[25] Reznikov previously stated on December 6 that Ukraine needs artillery ammunition, armored vehicles, tanks, and combat aircraft to support Ukrainian counteroffensives.[26]

**Senior US government officials may be correcting their assessments about Ukraine's ability and intent to conduct counteroffensive operations this winter.** Voice of America National Security Correspondent Jeff Seldin reported that an unnamed senior US military official stated that, "We know the Ukrainians can fight and fight well under these [winter] conditions" on December 12.[27] DNI Haines previously mistakenly identified the optimal window of opportunity for Ukraine to conduct more counteroffensives as the spring rather than winter on December 3.[28] ISW previously assessed that Ukraine likely seeks to conduct successive operations through the winter of 2022–2023.[29]

**The UK MoD assessed that Russia still likely aims to retain control over all its occupied Ukrainian territory, supporting ISW's recent assessment that the Kremlin likely maintains its maximalist objectives in Ukraine.**[30] The UK MoD assessed that Russian military leadership still

intends to make additional advances within Donetsk Oblast but that current Russian military strategy is highly unlikely to allow Moscow to accomplish that goal.[31] ISW previously assessed that Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov's December 8 statements defining Russian territorial goals as controlling all of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts remain maximalist given his restatement of Putin's February 24 goals of "demilitarization" and "denazification" of Ukraine, which would inhibit Ukraine's ability to resist future Russian military or subversion campaigns.[32]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are continuing to shape and consolidate their force composition in eastern Ukraine to bolster defenses against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives near the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and support limited offensive efforts in Donetsk Oblast.
- The cost of the Russian war in Ukraine will likely continue to undermine Russian President Vladimir Putin's geopolitical campaigns worldwide.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officially denied rumors that Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov has been or soon will be replaced, although it stopped short of offering the kind of credible support for this denial that it has provided that Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu is still on the job.
- Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated that Ukraine intends to continue counteroffensives in winter 2022–2023 after the hard freeze enables maneuver warfare, supporting an ISW assessment.
- Senior US government officials may be correcting their assessments about Ukraine's ability and intent to conduct counteroffensive operations this winter.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks near Svatove and Kremenna as Ukrainian forces struck rear areas in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka–Donetsk City areas and conducted defensive operations southwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian military assets and logistics hubs along critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces are fortifying the northern beaches of Crimea along the Black Sea coast.
- Russian forces may lack sufficient infrastructure to support their troops in Crimea.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 10

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 10, 6:40 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

An unnamed US defense source told *The Times* that the Pentagon is no longer insisting that Ukraine should not strike military targets within Russia.[1] The source noted that the Pentagon has changed its perspective on this matter following the recent intensification of Russian missile strikes on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure over the last few months and that the Pentagon has become less concerned regarding the risk of escalation, including nuclear escalation, with Russia.[2] *The Times* suggested that this development is a "green light" for Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian territory.[3] Ukrainian commitments to Western partners previously stipulated that Ukraine had the right to use force to regain all its territory, including territory seized by Russia in 2014.[4] The US has previously not made an effort to prevent Ukraine from striking legitimate military targets located on sovereign Ukrainian territory, and the alleged statement made by the undisclosed US source is an extension of the previous policy. International law allows Ukrainian forces to strike legitimate targets even in Russian territory, especially targets from which Russian forces are launching attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.

**Russian forces conducted attacks against critical infrastructure targets in southern Ukraine using a significantly higher number of Iranian-made drones than in previous weeks.** Ukrainian Air Force Command reported on December 10 that Russian forces conducted 15 attacks with Shahed-136 and 131 drones in Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa oblasts and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 10 of the drones.[5] Ukrainian Presidential Office Deputy Head Kyrylo Tymoshenko stated that one of the successful Russian drone strikes severely impacted critical infrastructure facilities in Odesa City and that restoration efforts would take longer than usual.[6] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces still pose a threat to the Ukrainian energy grid and civilian population despite Ukrainian air

defenses' high rates of shooting down Russian high-precision weapons systems.[7] ISW also previously assessed that Russian forces likely modified the drones for cooler weather and resumed using Iranian-made drones to strike Ukrainian cities for the first time in three weeks on December 7. [8] Russian forces have not used a higher number of Iranian-made drones in attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure since October 23.[9] The increased pace of Russian attacks using Iranian-made drones follows a December 9 NBC News report that senior US officials stated that Russia is providing an unprecedented level of military and technical support to Iran in exchange for Iranian-made weapons systems, including drones.[10] The increased pace of Russian drone attacks may indicate that Russian forces accumulated more drones over the three-week period of not using them or that Russia has recently received or expects soon to receive a new shipment of drones from Iran.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin is risking the loss of support from former proxy republic leaders and veterans due to Russian forces' failure to push Ukrainian forces further west of Donetsk City and to "defend" Donbas.** A former Defense Minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), Igor Girkin, who had also led the siege of Sloviansk in 2014, directly criticized Putin for failing to push Ukrainian forces near Donetsk City out of artillery range even though Putin had identified the protection of Donbas civilians as one of the objectives of the Russian "special military operation."[11] Girkin specifically criticized Putin's December 9 statement, which characterized the progress of the special military operation as "stable," stating that only Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) see the war as successful. Former DNR Security Minister Alexander Khodakovskiy noted emerging criticism of Putin, observing that Putin's long reign has not completely been successful."[12] Khodakovskiy also noted emerging discussions of the need to change the state of affairs, alluded to corruption schemes surrounding the reconstruction of Mariupol, and added that Putin had inherited a rather corrupt society that he cannot fix by removing Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov (which Putin has not yet officially done). A prominent Russian milblogger also accused the Russian Armed Forces of failing to conduct counterbattery fire in defense of Donetsk City, despite never having failed to do so during the previous eight years of war.[13]

Girkin's and Khodakovskiy's critiques are unprecedently direct compared with their previous attacks on the Kremlin. These explicit attacks on Putin may reflect a rift between the pro-war DNR and veteran communities and Putin. The Russian veteran and proxy community had long warned the Kremlin about the design flaws of its military campaign but had rallied behind Putin in the belief that his war – at the very least – would lead to the Russian occupation of Donbas.[14] ISW had previously also observed video footage of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) refusing to fight for territory in the DNR following the Russian capture of Lysychansk, and it is likely that proxy commanders and ideologists sought to prioritize the occupation of Donbas prior to embarking on Putin's maximalist goal of conquering all of Ukraine.[15] Putin, however, had not delivered on his February 24 rhetorical goal of "saving" people in Donbas by forcing the Kyiv government to capitulate, nor has he accomplished localized military objectives in Donbas. Putin's conditions-setting for a protracted war may further challenge his efforts to appease the ever-growing milblogger community that represents and speaks to important nationalist factions and interests.

**Russian authorities are increasingly importing Chechen elements into occupied Ukraine to shape administrative regimes of occupied areas.** Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov stated on December 8 that a Chechen delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister Ibragim Zakriev visited Kherson Oblast and met with Kherson occupation Head Vladimir Saldo.[16] Saldo praised the Chechen Republic for being an example of economic well-being, resilience, and growth following years of devastating conflicts and stressed that he hopes to learn from the Chechen experience in developing a model of administration for Kherson Oblast.[17] Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov similarly noted that Kadyrov appointed a Chechen official to "share the experience of the formation of the [Chechen] republic."[18] Fedorov emphasized that this official is largely meant to maintain control over local pro-Russian collaborators and terrorize the civilian population.[19] The same Chechen delegation also met with the Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration to discuss cooperation and development measures.[20] The Chechen Republic and affiliated officials notably have a history of brutality and are not well-renowned for administrative capabilities, but Chechen detachments have played a significant law enforcement role and acted as security services in Russian rear areas in occupied portions of Ukraine throughout the war.[21] It is therefore likely that Russian occupation administrators seek to integrate Chechen officials into their occupation structures to consolidate their administrative control by capitalizing on Chechen expertise in oppression and security functions. This suggests that dissent and Ukrainian partisan activities are challenging the ability of occupation regimes to govern effectively, and the integration of Chechen models of administration is likely meant as a mitigating factor.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- *The Times* reported that an unnamed US Defense source stated that the Pentagon is no longer insisting that Ukraine refrain from striking military targets in Russia given the ongoing Russian campaign of systematically destroying Ukrainian critical infrastructure.
  - Russian forces conducted attacks against Ukrainian infrastructure using a higher number of Iranian-made drones than in previous weeks.
  - Putin risks losing support from proxy leaders in Donetsk Oblast due to Russian forces' failure to push Ukrainian forces out of artillery range of Donetsk City.
  - Russian authorities are increasingly importing Chechen officials and forces to man administrative regimes of occupied areas.
  - Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations toward Svatove, and Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks near Kremminna.
  - Russian forces continued attempts to advance toward Bakhmut and in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and to defend their positions in western Donetsk Oblast.
  - Russian authorities plan to launch programs in Russia and occupied Ukrainian territories to prepare children for military service.
  - Russian forces in occupied Donetsk Oblast are reportedly commandeering civilian utility equipment to construct defensive structures.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 9

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 9, 6:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to discuss negotiations with Ukraine as a means of separating Ukraine from its Western supporters by portraying Kyiv as unwilling to compromise or even to engage in serious talks. During a news conference at the Eurasian Economic Union summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on December 9, Putin clarified his December 7 statements wherein he suggested that Russia was preparing for a "lengthy" war and stated that he meant the settlement process would be protracted.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin emphasized that the settlement process will be challenging and take time, and that all participants will need to agree with realities on the ground in Ukraine (by which he presumably means recognizing Russian control of any territories it has annexed), but that at the end of the day, Russia is open to negotiations.<sup>[2]</sup> Putin also criticized statements made by former German chancellor Angela Merkel that the 2014 Minsk Agreements were an attempt to "buy time for Ukraine" and accused Merkel and the West of propagating distrust in negotiating future settlements.<sup>[3]</sup> Putin remarked that based on this understanding of the Minsk Agreements, perhaps Russia should have begun military operations earlier.<sup>[4]</sup> Despite the constant employment of adversarial rhetoric regarding the settlement process, Putin continued to claim that Russia remains open to the possibility of negotiations.<sup>[5]</sup>

Putin has consistently weaponized invocations of the negotiation process to isolate Ukraine from partner support by framing Ukraine as refusing concessions and likely seeks to use any ceasefire and negotiation window to allow Russian troops time to reconstitute and relaunch operations, thus depriving Ukraine of the initiative. A ceasefire agreement that occurs soon enough to allow Russian forces to rest and refit this winter is extremely unlikely, however. Negotiating a protracted, theater-wide ceasefire takes time. Russia and Ukraine are extremely far apart on the terms of any such agreement, and it is almost impossible to imagine a ceasefire being agreed to, let alone implemented, for some months, which would deprive Russia of the opportunity to pause Ukrainian winter counter-offensives and reset before spring.

Putin may be overly optimistic about the prospects for a more immediate cessation of hostilities, but that is also unlikely given his rhetoric as well as statements by Ukrainian leaders and the West, of which he is well aware. It is more likely that Putin is fanning discussions of a ceasefire primarily as part of an information operation designed to expand cleavages between Ukraine and its backers by portraying Kyiv as unwilling to talk. Putin is likely secondarily setting conditions for actual negotiations sometime in 2023, presumably after Russian forces have secured more of the territory he claims to have annexed.

**Putin's positioning in the Russian information space continues to oscillate between supporting the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and backing the nationalist and pro-war milblogger community.** Putin stated that the Russian MoD "behaves transparently" and properly reflects the "stable" progress of the "special military operation" in its daily reports.<sup>[6]</sup> Putin, however, then proceeded to undermine the Russian MoD when responding to a question about persistent problems with supplying the army and mobilization, noting that the Russian MoD informed him that the Russian Armed Forces has solved most of its debilitating issues.<sup>[7]</sup> Putin also told journalists: "You cannot trust anyone. You can only trust me," when responding to a question about whether Russians should trust Russian MoD or sources operating on the frontlines.<sup>[8]</sup> Putin's statements seemingly indicate that he is distancing himself from the milblogger community, which largely reports or obtains information from the frontlines. Putin's statement on the transparency of the Russian MoD briefs—which the Russian milblogger community heavily criticizes for its inaccuracies and censorship—may aim to blunt such critiques or could be an effort to deflect the blame for military failures in Ukraine onto the Russian MoD, or both.

Putin likely attempts to preserve the position he has tried to occupy throughout his reign, in which he is seemingly aware of all Russian problems while not being directly responsible for them. Putin has long established the Russian MoD as a scapegoat for his failures, but the quasi-official milblogger community may pose a threat to his pretense of ignorance of problems. Putin remains in a predicament in which he relies on the support of the nationalist community to rally support behind his war in Ukraine, but must also mitigate the risk of angering the nationalists by failing to deliver their unrealistic and unattainable visions for the Russian military campaign. Putin, thus, needs to continue to play the part of the ultimate arbiter of the truth to manage the prominence of the quasi-official sources while simultaneously appealing to them in critiquing his very own security institutions. He remains unlikely to shut down the independent milblogger community but equally unlikely to commit fully to supporting it or pursuing its preferred extremist courses of action.

**An independent open-source investigation by BBC's Russia service and independent Russia outlet *Medazona* offered a series of observations on the nature of losses suffered by Russian troops in Ukraine.** The BBC confirmed the deaths of 10,000 Russian soldiers in Ukraine based on open-source records and noted that over 400 of the deceased were soldiers called up by partial mobilization.<sup>[9]</sup> This number notably does not encapsulate the actual scale of Russian losses in Ukraine and reflects only those whose deaths are confirmable in the open source. The BBC investigation found that Russia's Krasnodar Krai had the highest number of confirmed losses (428 dead), followed by Dagestan (363 dead), and Buryatia (356 dead).<sup>[10]</sup> In comparison, BBC only found 54 confirmed deaths from Moscow, which by itself makes up 9% of the population of Russia.<sup>[11]</sup> BBC concluded that although citizens of national republics (such as Dagestan, Buryatia, Altai, and Bashkortostan) are sent to the front and die in combat at higher rates than citizens of ethnically Russian regions, in absolute terms, ethnic Russians comprise the majority of Russian military deaths, and their proportion of the military dead is approximately equal to their proportion in the overall Russian population.<sup>[12]</sup> BBC concluded that this finding suggests that discrepancies in Russian force generation efforts therefore fall along regional and territorial lines as opposed to predominantly ethnic lines and noted that military service is seen as the only lifeline in regions on Russia's economic periphery where social mobility is greatly restrained.<sup>[13]</sup> As ISW has previously observed, the impacts of force generation have been firmly siloed on a regional basis, which further breaks down along overlapping ethnic and socioeconomic lines.<sup>[14]</sup> The BBC investigation partially contradicts ISW's previous assessments that the Kremlin was attempting to shield the ethnic Russian population from the war by drawing disproportionately on minority regions. ISW has no basis for questioning this conclusion.

The BBC investigation also found that both elite units and officers have suffered substantial losses in Ukraine. The BBC reported that the Special Forces of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU Spetsnaz) has suffered 250 confirmed losses, nearly 25% of whom were officers, which in the case of some individual Spetsnaz units exceeds cumulative losses over 10 years of Russian operations in Chechnya.<sup>[15]</sup> The BBC additionally identified 1,509 confirmed officer deaths - or 15% of the 10,002 identified losses.<sup>[16]</sup> The losses accrued by elite units and the Russian officer cadre will have significant and generational ramifications for the Russian military.

**Russian officials continue efforts to place legislative controls on domestic dissent.** Independent Russian outlet *Meduza* reported on December 9 that Russian State Duma deputies proposed a bill introducing new crimes and charges related to financing, inducing, recruiting, training for, organizing, or engaging in sabotage activities.<sup>[17]</sup> In all cases, except for complicity in sabotage, the proposed law introduces a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Life imprisonment is currently the maximum sentence only in the case of deaths resulting from sabotage actions.<sup>[18]</sup> As ISW has recently reported, Russian officials have been taking similar measures to expand legislative oversight of domestic affairs in an attempt to further stifle domestic dissent. The Russian Ministry of Justice, for example, expanded

the list of “individual foreign agents” on November 27, and Russian media began reporting that the Russian government is taking steps to broaden the definition of foreign agents, as well as imposing additional restrictions on the activities and movements of those deemed to be foreign agents.[19] Such legislative efforts suggest that the Kremlin continues to fear domestic friction resulting from the effects of its conduct of the war in Ukraine.

**Senior US officials stated that Russia is providing an unprecedented level of military and technical support to Iran in exchange for Iranian-made weapons systems.** NBC News reported on December 9 that senior US presidential administration officials stated that Russia may be providing Iran with advanced military equipment and components, including helicopters and air defense systems, in exchange for Iranian-made high-precision weapons systems that Russia has used and intends to use in the war in Ukraine.[20] The officials specified that Russia may send Iran Su-35 aircraft within the next year and that Russia is possibly seeking to establish a joint Russian Iranian production line for drone systems in the Russian Federation.[21] US intelligence officials stated on November 19 that Russian and Iranian officials finalized a deal in early November to manufacture Iranian drones on Russian territory.[22] A Russian milblogger claimed on December 9 that air traffic monitors show that Iranian Air Force cargo planes resumed flights to Moscow on December 8 following a short break in such flights.[23] ISW assessed that Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Alexander Fomin met with Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief General Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran on December 3, likely to further discuss the sale of Iranian drones and missiles to Russia for use in Ukraine.[24] ISW has previously assessed that the Russian military is increasingly reliant on Iranian-made weapons systems due to the depletion of its arsenal of high-precision weapons systems.[25]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to discuss negotiations with Ukraine as a means of separating Ukraine from its Western supporters by portraying Kyiv as unwilling to compromise or even to talk seriously.
- Putin’s positioning in the Russian information space continues to oscillate between supporting the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and backing the nationalist and pro-war milblogger community.
- An independent open-source investigation by the BBC’s Russia service and independent Russia outlet *Mediazona* found that members of Russian national republics deploy to Ukraine at disproportionately higher rates than ethnically Russian oblasts, but that ethnic Russians are dying at a rate proportional to their representation in the Russian Federation population, contrary to previous ISW assessments.
- Russian officials strengthened existing legislation to stifle domestic dissent.
- Senior US officials stated that Russia is providing an unprecedented level of military and technical support to Iran in exchange for Iranian-made weapons systems.
- Russian forces established defensive lines near Svatove, and Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks near Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian forces may have established positions on an island west of Kherson City in the Dnipro River.
- Ukrainian forces’ interdiction campaign against Russian military assets and logistics hubs in southern Ukraine has likely degraded Russian forces, their logistics lines, and broader Russian morale.
- Putin doubled down on claims that Russia will not conduct a second wave of mobilization amidst persistent concerns within Russian society.
- Russian occupation authorities continued to strengthen physical, legal, and social control over occupied territories.

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#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 8, 6:40 PM ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz stated that the risk of Russian nuclear escalation is currently low, partially supporting ISW's previous assessments.** Scholtz stated that "Russia stopped threatening to use nuclear weapons" because an international "red line" contributed to "putting a stop" to Russian nuclear escalation threats on December 8.[1] ISW has always assessed that Russian nuclear escalation in Ukraine was unlikely.[2] Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated Russia's official position on nuclear weapons, including Russia's non-first-use policy, on December 7.[3] Both Scholtz's and Putin's statements support ISW's previous assessment that while Russian officials may engage in forms of nuclear saber-rattling as part of an information operation meant to undermine Western support for Ukraine, Russian officials have no intention of actually using them on the battlefield.[4]

**The Kremlin likely has not abandoned its maximalist objectives in Ukraine despite Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov's first-time acknowledgement that Moscow's current territorial objective is to fully seize four partially occupied Ukrainian oblasts.** Peskov took an opportunity to further capitalize on the Western desire for negotiations on December 8 when expanding upon Russian President Vladimir Putin's December 7 remarks regarding the acquisition of "new Russian territories".[5] Peskov stated that one of the main goals of the Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine was to "protect residents of southeastern Ukraine and Donbas" when responding to a journalist's question regarding the Kremlin's original objectives for war.[6] Peskov also noted that there are no talks about annexing new territories that are currently not under Russian partial occupation as there is "still a lot of work to be done" to fully occupy Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts. Peskov, however, reiterated that the Kremlin is still pursuing its "demilitarization" and "denazification" objectives in Ukraine, which confirm that Russia is still pursuing regime change ("denazification") and the elimination of Ukraine's ability to resist future Russian attacks or pressure ("demilitarization"). The Kremlin's objectives, in other words, continue to remain unchanged from those set following the Russian withdrawal from around Kyiv. Peskov's comments were not an inflection in Russian war aims or demands.

Putin's invocation of Russian imperial history on December 7 and his recent remarks regarding Russia's role as the only "guarantee of Ukrainian sovereignty" are further indicators that the Kremlin is setting conditions for a protracted war aimed at eradicating Ukrainian sovereignty.[7] **The Kremlin's deliberately inconsistent messaging is part of a persistent information operation intended to mislead the West into pushing Kyiv to negotiate and to offer preemptive concessions.**[8]

**The Kremlin's Western-oriented messaging is continuing to anger the pro-war milblogger community that is increasingly accusing the Kremlin of deviating from its original war goals in Ukraine, however.** A prominent milblogger stated that "the annexation of Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts was not among the declared goals of the special military operation on February 24".[9] Less prominent milbloggers claimed that Putin does not have the capacity to continue pursuing his maximalist goals following numerous withdrawals and unsuccessful offensive campaigns, forcing the Kremlin to accept protracted war as the means to wear down Ukraine.[10] The Kremlin's deliberately inconsistent rhetoric may have further ramifications on the appeal to Russians of Putin's vision for the war in Ukraine.

**Putin may be deliberately distancing his rhetoric from nationalists' unrealistic demands for the Russian war efforts in Ukraine.** Putin stated on December 8 that in order to help Russia complete its war goals Russians should stop engaging in confrontations on the information front and suppress their impulses to believe fake and leaked information.[11] Putin added that there is "a lot of noise" within the information space regarding Russia's missile campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure and falsely implied that Russian strikes are retaliatory measures following the claimed Ukrainian attack on Kerch Strait Bridge, shelling of the Kursk Nuclear Power Plant, and Ukraine's uninterest in providing water to Donetsk City. A prominent milblogger — who had been calling on Putin to retaliate for Ukraine's liberation of Russian-occupied territories and claimed Ukrainian strikes against Russia — found Putin's comments disappointing and angrily interpreted Putin's statements to mean that the Kremlin had not planned to strike Ukrainian infrastructure if the attack against Kerch Strait Bridge did not occur.[12]

The Kremlin has been increasingly attempting to reorient public opinion to favor its official messaging, and Putin's December 8 statement may aim to diminish or marginalize the milbloggers to re-establish the perception that the Kremlin maintains a "moderate" and authoritative position. Putin has previously publicly associated himself with nationalist milbloggers but still drawn criticism for failing to fully ideologize Russia.

Putin may be attempting to get the milblogger community under control by attacking its credibility and encouraging self-censorship. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on November 6 that Russians must listen to information about mobilization from Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) when responding to a question regarding Telegram channels.[13] While Putin may also be considering actually censoring the milbloggers, such measures remain unlikely given Putin's ongoing efforts to retain relations with select milbloggers. Putin's December 8 statement may also be an example of poor messaging discipline that failed to account for Russian milbloggers' growing complaints about Moscow's failures to address the perceived Ukrainian threat against Russia.

**On the other hand, a senior Kremlin official explained why the Kremlin tolerates criticism from the pro-war Russian milblogger community for the first time.** Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova responded to a question concerning the discrepancies between the Kremlin's and milbloggers' coverage of the war at the "Voenkors [milbloggers] as a New Information Powerhouse" panel on December 7.[14] Zakharova implied that the Kremlin permits divergent coverage of the war in order to maintain a uniform political view — likely referring to the milbloggers' ongoing support for Putin's vision for seizing all of Ukraine. Zakharova also suggested that the Kremlin is not interested in enforcing "absolutist" information policies as the divergent voices allow the Kremlin to monitor different opinions and their influence in society. Zakharova hypothesized that if the Kremlin attempted to force scripted slogans upon shapers of the Russian information space it would not deprive them of their opinions or influence but only remove these figures from the Kremlin's eye.

Zakharova's statements are a candid acknowledgement of the Kremlin's desire to appeal to the wider nationalist audiences at the expense of the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) credibility, as ISW has long assessed. The convening of the panel itself further confirms that the Kremlin is cognizant of its inability to strip the milbloggers of their influence at this stage of the war, granting milbloggers growing credibility in the Russian information space. The Kremlin, however, continues to intensify censorship against Russian opposition bloggers that criticize the Russian government, analyze combat footage, and voice concerns similar to those of nationalist milbloggers' about mobilization and frontline problems. Russian officials have announced a search for famous Russian YouTube personality Dmitry Ivanov (1.7 million viewers) who had analyzed the ground situation during the siege of Mariupol and has criticized Zakharova, for example.[15]

**Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley stated that fighting in Ukraine may intensify this winter despite the recent fighting tempo decrease from autumn, partially supporting ISW's assessments and forecasts.**[16] Milley told the *Wall Street Journal* on December 7 that frontlines in Ukraine are currently "stabilizing[.] and as winter rolls in," he acknowledged the "potential opportunity for offensive action" from either Russian or Ukrainian forces during "the depth of the winter because of the weather and the terrain." [17] Milley's assessment diverges from US Director for National Intelligence Avril Haines' December 3 forecast that the pace of the war in Ukraine will slow over the winter so that fighting can resume in spring 2023.[18] Milley's statement supports ISW's assessment that Ukrainian forces will be able to exploit the weather conditions as the hard freeze approaches in late December since winter is conducive for mechanized warfare in Ukraine.[19] ISW assesses Ukrainian forces likely are preparing to take advantage of frozen terrain to move more easily than they could in the muddy autumn months and that Ukraine's continued operational successes depend on Ukrainian forces' ability to continue successive operations through the winter of 2022–2023 without interruption.[20]

**Ukrainian officials stated on December 8 that Russian forces further militarized the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).** Ukrainian state nuclear energy agency Energoatom reported on December 8 that Russian forces transferred several Grad MLRS systems near reactor number 6 and the dry storage fuel area at the ZNPP.[21] Energoatom stated that Russian forces most likely plan to use the Grad systems to strike Nikopol and Marhanets, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast - near daily targets of Russian shelling already.[22] ISW has reported on prior footage confirming that Russian forces have stored military equipment, including ammunition, armored personnel carriers, anti-aircraft guns, and other armaments on the ZNPP grounds.[23] New equipment deployments to the ZNPP may be an attempt to placate ongoing speculation among Russian nationalist milbloggers of a possible Russian withdrawal from the ZNPP, which the Kremlin has denied twice within the past 10 days.[24]

#### Key Takeaways

- German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that the risk of Russian nuclear escalation is low.
- Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General Mark Milley stated that fighting may intensify in Ukraine during the winter.
- The Kremlin has likely not abandoned its maximalist goals in Ukraine despite Dmitry Pskov's comments on Russian territorial objectives.

- The Kremlin's Western-orientated messaging continues to anger the pro-war milblogger community.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin may be distancing his rhetoric from nationalists' unrealistic demands for the Russian war in Ukraine.
- A senior Kremlin official admitted that the Kremlin tolerates criticism from the pro-war milblogger community out of a desire to appeal to the wider nationalist community.
- Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces further militarized the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Russian forces reinforced positions near Svatove and conducted counterattacks near Kremenna amid continued Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in eastern Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka–Donetsk City areas.
- A Russian government official implied that Putin's word is law when it comes to the military mobilization of Russian citizens.
- Russian occupation officials increased security measures in Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 7, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin is setting conditions for a protracted war of conquest in Ukraine.** During a meeting with the Russian Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC), Putin remarked that the "special operation" in Ukraine can be a "lengthy process" and that the acquisition of new territory is a significant result of this process for Russia. [1] Putin compared himself favorably with Russian Tsar Peter the Great by noting that Russia now controls the Sea of Azov, which Peter the Great also fought for. [2] This invocation of Russian imperial history explicitly frames Putin's current goals in Ukraine as overtly imperialistic and still maximalist. Putin is conditioning Russian domestic audiences to expect a protracted, grinding war in Ukraine that continues to seek the conquest of additional Ukrainian territory.

The Russian information space responded positively to Putin's assertions and set further conditions for the protraction of the war, with one milblogger comparing Ukraine to Syria and noting that Russian forces did not start meaningfully experiencing victories on the battlefield until years into the operation. [3] ISW has previously observed that the Kremlin has been setting information conditions for the protraction of the war in Ukraine since the summer following Russian forces' dismal failures to secure and retain their primary objectives. [4] This informational conditioning is fundamentally incompatible with any discussions regarding a ceasefire or negotiations. Putin seems unwilling to risk losing domestic momentum by halting his offensive operations even briefly, let alone to pursue an off-ramp short of his full objectives, which, as he is making increasingly clear, appear to include the reconstitution of the Russian Empire in some form.

**Putin notably is using the Russian HRC as a means to consolidate political power in a way that is fundamentally incompatible with basic principles of international human rights law.** As ISW previously reported, Putin changed the composition of the HRC on November 17, removing Russian human rights activists who were critical of Kremlin censorship and installing political and proxy officials as well as a prominent Russian military correspondent. [5] The use of a domestic human rights body to advocate and set conditions for the perpetuation of a genocidal war in Ukraine undermines statements made by the Kremlin on Russia's purported commitment to human rights. Putin's comment accusing the West of using human rights to violate state sovereignty undermines a central premise of the international effort to protect human rights. [6]

**Putin reiterated Russia's formal position on the use of nuclear weapons in a statement to the Russian HRC on December 7 with no noteworthy changes.** Putin claimed that the threat of nuclear war is growing, but that Russia will not be the first to employ nuclear weapons. [7] Putin added, however, that if Russia is not the first to initiate the first use of nuclear weapons, it will also not be the second to do so, because the "possibility of using [a nuclear weapon] in the event of a nuclear strike on [Russian] territory are very limited." [8] Putin reiterated that Russian nuclear doctrine is premised on

self-defense and stated that any Russian nuclear use would be retaliatory. Putin also emphasized that Russia is not “crazy” and is acutely aware of the power of nuclear weapons but will not “brandish” them. Putin’s statements support ISW’s previous assessment that while Russian officials may engage in forms of nuclear saber-rattling as part of an information operation meant to undermine Western support for Ukraine, Russian officials have no intention of actually using them on the battlefield.[9]

**NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that the Russian military seeks an operational pause in winter 2022-2023 to regain the initiative and conduct a counteroffensive in spring 2023, partially supporting ISW’s prior assessment.[10]** Stoltenberg told the *Financial Times* on December 7 that Russia seeks to “freeze” the fighting in Ukraine “at least for a short period of time so they can regroup, repair, recover... [and] then try to launch a bigger offensive next spring.”[11] Stoltenberg’s statement supports ISW’s assessment that an operational pause would favor Russia by depriving Ukraine of the initiative. An operational pause this winter would likely prematurely culminate Ukraine’s counter-offensive operations, increase the likelihood that Ukraine loses the initiative, and grant degraded Russian forces a valuable three-to-four-month reprieve to reconstitute and prepare to fight on better footing.[12]

Putin continues to seem unwilling to pursue such a cessation of fighting, however. The Russian military is continuing offensive operations around Bakhmut and is—so far—denying itself the operational pause that would be consistent with best military practice. Putin’s current fixation with continuing offensive operations around Bakhmut and elsewhere is contributing to Ukraine’s ability to maintain the military initiative in other parts of the theater. Ukraine’s continued operational successes depend on Ukrainian forces’ ability to continue successive operations through the winter of 2022-2023 without interruption.[13]

**Russian forces used Iranian-made drones to strike Ukrainian cities for the first time in three weeks, likely as a result of Russian forces having modified the drones for colder weather.** Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 7 that Russian forces resumed the use of Iranian-made loitering munitions after a three-week break and suggested that Russian forces had faced complications using the drones due to icing issues in colder weather.[14] Ukrainian Southern Command Spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk stated on December 7 that Russian forces resumed the use of the Iranian-made drones intending to exhaust Ukrainian air defenses in various areas of activity and open areas of the front in Ukraine.[15] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces deployed Shahed-136 drones in attacks on Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Poltava, Zhytomyr, and Zaporizhia Oblasts.[16] Russian forces have likely modified the drones to operate in colder weather conditions and will likely increase their use in Ukraine in the coming weeks in support of their campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure. ISW has previously reported that Russian forces are increasingly reliant on Iranian-made weapon systems due to the depletion of the Russian military’s high-precision weapons arsenal.[17]

**Russian efforts to pressure Belarus into joining the war in Ukraine may be causing internal friction in the Belarusian military.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 7 that soldiers of the Belarusian border service and the Belarusian Armed forces are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the activities of the Belarusian military-political leadership due to the threat of Belarus entering the war in Ukraine.[18] ISW has previously assessed that Russian Defense Minister Army General Shoigu met with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Belarusian Defense Minister Major General Viktor Khrenin on December 3 to place further pressure on Belarus to support Russia’s offensive campaign in Ukraine.[19] ISW has also previously reported that Belarusian officials, including Lukashenko and Khrenin, have used rhetoric to support an ongoing Russian information operation aimed at fixing Ukrainian forces on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border with the threat of Belarus entering the war.[20] Russian pressure and the participation of Belarusian officials in the ongoing Russian information operation may be causing unease among Belarusian military personnel. ISW continues to assess that Belarus is highly unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine due to domestic factors that constrain Lukashenko’s willingness to do so.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin is setting conditions for a protracted war of conquest in Ukraine.**
- **Putin is using Russia’s Human Rights Council to consolidate power while rejecting principles of international human rights law.**
- **NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg made comments supporting ISW’s previous assessments that an operational pause in the winter of 2022-2023 would favor Russia.**
- **Russian forces used Shahed-136 drones in Ukraine for the first time in three weeks.**

- Russian efforts to pressure Belarus into joining the war in Ukraine may be causing friction in the Belarusian military.
- Russian forces are likely increasing the pace of their counterattacks in eastern Kharkiv and western Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City areas.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations and the reorientation of their forces in eastern Kherson Oblast.
- Independent Russian media sources indicated that mobilization efforts will continue despite statements from Russian officials to the contrary.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely transforming Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast, into a rear military and logistics base for Russian forces.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Angela Howard, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 6, 8:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin directly responded to Russian rumors of a second wave of mobilization in an apparent effort to manage growing societal concern and recentralize information about the war with the Russian government and its authorized outlets. Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov on December 6 urged Russians to rely on communications from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the president and to ignore the "provocative messages" published on social media platforms such as Telegram regarding a second wave of mobilization.<sup>[1]</sup> Peskov's statement is likely aimed at discrediting the growing influence of both Russian opposition and pro-war Telegram channels that have been consistently reporting on indicators of the Kremlin's intention to resume mobilization in 2023.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin is also increasing measures to prevent mobilized men and their families from complaining about mobilization problems. Putin, for example, signed a law banning rallies in government buildings, universities, schools, hospitals, ports, train stations, churches, and airports—likely to suppress riots and protests among mobilized men and their families.<sup>[3]</sup>

**The Kremlin seems to be departing from the limited war messaging it has been using to reduce concerns among the general Russian public about the war, likely in an effort to condition the public for future mobilization waves.** Belgorod and Kursk oblasts have announced the formation of territorial defense units, exposing many civilians to the war under the absurd premise of the threat of a Ukrainian ground assault on Russia's border regions.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW previously reported that Kremlin propagandists have started propounding similar implausible theories about a Ukrainian ground threat to Russian territory.<sup>[5]</sup> Moscow officials even plastered advertisements for the special military operation throughout the city, which ISW has previously observed only in remote cities and settlements during the summer of 2022 amidst Russia's volunteer recruitment campaigns.<sup>[6]</sup> However, these information conditions are likely insufficient to convince the Russian population at large of the necessity for additional mobilization given the underwhelming response to volunteer recruitment advertisement efforts over the summer. The Kremlin risks further harming its credibility by announcing mobilization that has been predicted by unofficial sources but not discussed by Russian officials. Russian officials face major challenges balancing Russian force generation needs, which require the enthusiastic support of the milblogger community, and control of the Russian information space.

**Putin's decision to order a second wave of mobilization, general mobilization, or even announce a formal declaration of war with Ukraine will not fix the inherent constraints on Russian military power available for the war in Ukraine in the short term.** The Russian MoD can only simultaneously train about 130,000 conscripts during a bi-annual conscription cycle in peacetime and has struggled painfully to prepare a larger number of mobilized men over a shorter period.<sup>[7]</sup> The Ukrainian Commander of the Ground Forces, Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi, noted that Russian mobilized men who are now arriving at the frontlines are better trained than those mobilized men who had arrived at the frontlines immediately after Putin's partial mobilization order on September 21.<sup>[8]</sup> The Kremlin took almost three months to prepare some of these units, while it prematurely committed other ill-prepared and poorly supplied mobilized elements to the frontlines. The Kremlin's sham announcement of the end of mobilization call-ups on October 28 is also an indicator that the Russian MoD acknowledges that it lacks the capacity to sustain reserve mobilization and conscription

simultaneously. The Kremlin's force generation efforts remain contingent on its ability to invest time and supplies into its personnel, requirements that are badly at odds with the Kremlin's lack of long-term strategic planning.

Igor Girkin, a former Russian militant commander and prominent critical voice in the Russian milblogger information space, returned to Telegram following a nearly two-month stint in Ukraine and used his return to offer a vitriolic first-hand account of the situation on the frontlines. Girkin posted on Telegram on December 6 to speak on his experiences in Ukraine for the first time since he announced he was leaving to join the Russian army to fight in Ukraine in October. [9] Girkin detailed his multiple and unsuccessful efforts to register and join various units and contentious interactions with Russian and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commanders and noted that he finally joined a DNR battalion illegally, which allowed him to deploy to the Svatove area in Luhansk Oblast.[10] Girkin concluded that based on his experience on the frontline, it is clear that Russian forces are suffering from a "crisis of strategic planning" due to the fact that troops are relying only on tactical inertia and not cohering around a wider strategic goal.[11] Girkin also noted that the Kremlin will be unsuccessful in igniting protests in Ukraine with its missile campaign against critical energy infrastructure, further noting that winter weather will not stop Ukrainian forces from advancing. [12] Several other prominent milbloggers amplified Girkin's story and conclusions, emphasizing Girkin's past leadership role in hostilities in Donbas in 2014.[13] This scathing critique of the Russian military leadership from one of the most vocal and well-known figureheads of the hyper-nationalist information space, who has now reportedly acquired first-hand experiences of the nuances of frontline life, is likely to exacerbate tension between Russian military leadership and milbloggers and may reignite fragmentation within the ultra-nationalist community itself.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin directly responded to Russian rumors of a second wave of mobilization in an apparent effort to manage growing societal concern and recentralize information about the war with the Russian government and its authorized outlets, but there are several indicators that Russia still intends to conduct a second wave of mobilization.
- Igor Girkin, a former Russian militant commander and prominent critical voice in the Russian milblogger information space, returned to Telegram following a nearly two-month stint in Ukraine and used his return to offer a vitriolic first-hand account of the situation on the frontlines.
- Ukrainian forces likely made recent gains in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast, and Russian forces conducted limited attacks and defended against Ukrainian counteroffensive actions.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks near Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made marginal territorial advances near Bakhmut, but Russian forces have not succeeded in their efforts to surround the city.
- Russian authorities are very likely conducting an information operation to convince Russians of the security and integrity of the Kerch Strait Bridge following repairs to the bridge span.
- Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova denied rumors on December 5 that Russia is preparing to withdraw from or transfer control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to another actor.
- Russian occupation authorities continued to strengthen security measures in occupied territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

George Barros, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 4, 6:15pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian officials have indicated that Ukrainian forces plan to continue offensive operations over the coming winter to capitalize on recent battlefield successes and prevent Russian forces from regaining the battlefield initiative. Spokesperson of the Ukrainian Armed Forces

Eastern Group Serhii Cherevatyi stated on December 4 that frozen ground enables heavy wheeled and tracked vehicles to advance and that Ukrainian forces are preparing such vehicles for winter operations.[1] Cherevatyi also stated that low-quality mobilized recruits and Wagner Group personnel recruited from Russian prisoners are unprepared for combat in the winter.[2] The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on November 20 that those who suggest the winter will pause hostilities “likely never sunbathed in January on the southern coast of Crimea,” suggesting that Ukrainian forces intend to continue counteroffensive operations over the coming winter that contribute toward the goal of retaking Crimea.[3] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Volodymyr Havrylov stated on November 18 that Ukrainian forces will continue to fight in the winter because any type of pause will allow Russian forces to reinforce their units and positions.[4] Ukrainian officials’ prior statements on ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive actions in Kherson Oblast are further evidence that these official statements on winter counteroffensive actions are indicators of continuing counteroffensive operations. [5]

**Senior US government officials are mistakenly identifying the optimal window of opportunity for Ukraine to conduct more counteroffensives as the spring rather than winter, despite Ukrainian officials’ statements to the contrary.** US Director for National Intelligence (DNI) Avril Haines assessed on December 3 that the pace of the war in Ukraine will slow over the winter so both sides can refit, resupply, and reconstitute, despite evidence that conditions on the ground favor a renewed offensive and despite the demonstrated tendency of Ukrainian forces to initiate new counteroffensive efforts relatively quickly after the previous effort has culminated.[6]

**Ukraine’s ability to maintain the military initiative and continue the momentum of its current operational successes depends on Ukrainian forces continuing to conduct successive operations through the winter of 2022-2023.** Russia lost the initiative in summer 2022 after its offensive in Donbas culminated.[7] Ukrainian forces gained and have retained the initiative since August 2022 and have been conducting a series of successful successive operations since then: Ukraine liberated most of Kharkiv Oblast in September, Kherson City in November, and is currently setting conditions for more Ukrainian pushes elsewhere this winter.[8] Successive operations are a key part of Ukraine’s campaign design. A series of successive Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts demonstrates the Ukrainian military’s remarkable operational planning skill and knowledge of the strengths of Soviet operational art. Soviet operational art emphasizes that militaries can only obtain their strategic objectives through the cumulative operational success of successive operations *ideally conducted without operational pauses between them*. [9] Recent official Ukrainian statements make clear that Ukraine’s campaign design is designed to allow a series of successive operations to deprive Russia of the initiative, defeat the Russian military, and liberate more Ukrainian territory.

**Weather conditions in winter 2023 likely will dictate a timeframe in which Ukraine can conduct maneuver warfare and continue its string of operational successes with minimal pauses that would increase the risks of Ukraine losing the initiative.** The fall mud season in November hampered maneuver warfare, as ISW previously noted.[10] Both Russia and Ukraine nevertheless continued aggressive offensive and counter-offensive operations throughout this muddy period despite some Western predictions that the mud would suspend operations. As the hard freeze approaches in late December, Ukrainian forces will be again able to exploit the weather conditions. Winter is usually the best season for mechanized warfare in Ukraine whereas spring is the nightmare season for fighting in Ukraine.[11] The thaw swells rivers and streams and turns fields into seas of mud. [12] Ukrainian forces likely are preparing to take advantage of frozen terrain to move more easily than they could in the muddy autumn months.[13]

If Ukraine’s allies and partners do not support Ukrainian forces to conduct large-scale decisive counteroffensive operations this winter—as the DNI’s statements might be construed to suggest – then Ukrainians’ ability to conduct maneuver warfare will be constrained until likely at least after the spring mud season in March 2023.[14] Such a course of action will likely prematurely culminate Ukraine’s current momentum and grant shattered Russian forces a valuable three-to-four-month reprieve to reconstitute and prepare to fight on a better footing.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian officials have indicated that Ukrainian forces will continue counteroffensive operations over the upcoming winter.**
- **Ukraine’s ability to maintain the military initiative depends on Ukrainian forces continuing counteroffensive operations in the winter of 2022-2023.**

- Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the directions of Kremenna and Svatove.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Groups of mobilized Russian soldiers continue to disrupt Russian force generation efforts with refusals to fight, insubordination, and defiance.
- Russian forces likely publicly executed residents in occupied Luhansk Oblast on accusations of partisan activity.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 3

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Riley Bailey, George Barros, Karolina Hird, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 3, 6 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces reportedly reached the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River across from Kherson City.** The Ukrainian “Carlson” volunteer special air intelligence unit posted footage on December 3 of Ukrainian servicemen traversing the Dnipro River in boats, reaching a wooden marina-like structure on the east bank, and raising a Ukrainian flag on a tower toward near the shore. [1] Special Unit “Carlson” reported that this is the first instance of a Ukrainian flag flying over the east bank of the Dnipro River and emphasized this operation will provide a springboard for subsequent Ukrainian operations on the east bank.[2] If confirmed, this limited Ukrainian incursion onto the east bank could open avenues for Ukrainian forces to begin to operate on the east bank. As ISW has previously reported, observed Russian fortifications on the left bank indicate Russian forces are anticipating Ukrainian offensive actions on the east bank and have been constructing defensive lines south of the Dnipro River.[3] The establishment of positions along the eastern riverbank will likely set conditions for future Ukrainian offensive operations into occupied Kherson Oblast, if Ukrainian troops choose to pursue this line of advance in the south.

**French President Emmanuel Macron amplified Russian information operations about the West’s need to discuss Russian “security guarantees” in a televised interview on December 3.** [4] Macron stated that the West should consider how to address Russian security guarantees if President Vladimir Putin agrees to negotiations about ending the war in Ukraine. “That topic will be part of the topics for peace, so we need to prepare what we are ready to do, how we protect our allies and member states, and how to give guarantees to Russia the day it returns to the negotiating table.”[5] ISW has extensively documented how the Kremlin demanded “security guarantees” and declared “lines” as part of the ultimatum it presented the US and NATO before launching the February 2022 invasion.[6] Russia’s demanded security guarantees entail partially dismantling NATO by returning NATO to its 1997 borders, and grants Russia a veto on future NATO expansion by demanding NATO suspend its “Open Door” policy.[7] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov referred to these precise demands on December 1, as ISW previously reported.[8] The Russian demand for supposed “security guarantees” is part of a larger Russian information operation that portrays NATO as having provoked the 2022 Russian invasion by threatening Russia. The security guarantees that Ukraine, NATO, and the rest of Europe would accept from Russia following the Kremlin’s unprovoked and brutal war of conquest against Ukraine might be a more appropriate topic of conversation for Western leaders considering negotiations with Moscow.

**Independent Russian polling data indicates that Russian citizens still support Russia’s military operations in Ukraine despite growing war weariness over the past six months.** Independent Russian polling organization Levada Center found that 74 percent of Russians support Russian forces’ actions in the war in Ukraine in a November poll published on December 2.[9] The poll found that 42 percent of respondents “strongly support” and 32 percent “somewhat support” Russian forces’ actions in Ukraine.[10] The poll also found that only 41 percent of respondents favored Russia continuing military operation in Ukraine, however, whereas 53 percent said that Russia should begin peace negotiations.[11] Levada Center polling between July and November 2022 shows small but consistent erosion in support for the war among Russians.[12] Levada Center findings are similar to a reported internal Kremlin-commissioned poll from November that found that 55 percent of Russians favor peace talks with Ukraine and only 25 percent favor continuing the war.[13]

Both polls indicate that a shrinking but still significant portion of Russian citizens support—and are even enthusiastic about—continuing the war in Ukraine despite Russian military failures. Russian

morale and political support for the war will likely further degrade with time if current trends hold. The longer the war continues to produce Russian casualties while Ukrainian forces gain ground the more the socio-political dynamics will likely continue to turn against the Kremlin. An operational pause under the guise of peace negotiations could alleviate growing political pressure on the Kremlin and allow Russia to reconstitute its forces for subsequent renewed offensive operations.

**Conditions in eastern Ukraine are reportedly becoming more conducive for a higher pace of operations as winter sets in.** A Russian milblogger claimed on December 3 that the ground has frozen along the Kremenna-Svatove line and that he expects that Ukrainian forces will likely increase the pace of their counteroffensive operations in the area as a result.[14] Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai also stated on December 2 that weather is finally changing on the Kremenna-Svatove line and that he expects that Ukrainian forces will soon be able to improve their counter-offensive maneuver operations as mud in the area fully freezes.[15] ISW has previously assessed that the overall pace of operations is likely to increase in the coming weeks as consistent cold weather allows the ground to freeze throughout the theater, especially in eastern Ukraine where operations on both sides have been bogged down by heavy mud.[16] Neither Russians nor Ukrainians will likely suspend offensive operations in one of the most optimal times of year for mechanized maneuver warfare in this region.

**The Russian and Belarusian Ministers of Defense met in Minsk likely to further strengthen bilateral security ties between Russia and Belarus.** Russian Minister of Defense Army General Sergei Shoigu met with Belarusian Minister of Defense Major General Viktor Khrenin and signed amendments to the Agreement on the Joint Provision of Regional Security in the Military Sphere. [17] Shoigu also met with Belarusian President Aleander Lukashenko during which Lukashenko stated that Belarusian and Russian forces continue to train together on Belarusian territory so that the “Union State [can] repel any aggression.[18] Shoigu likely met with Khrenin and Lukashenko in an attempt to place pressure on Belarus to further support Russia’s offensive campaign in Ukraine. ISW has previously assessed that Belarus is highly unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine due to domestic factors that constrain Lukashenko’s willingness to do so.[19]

**Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri reportedly met with Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Alexander Fomin in Tehran on December 3.[20]** The two discussed unspecified military cooperation, according to official readouts from Iranian state media. They may have discussed the sale of Iranian drones and missiles to Russia for use in Ukraine. Bagheri is Iran’s chief of defense and responsible for military policy and strategic guidance. The meeting has not been reported in Russian media as of this writing.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces reportedly reached the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River across from Kherson City.
- French President Emmanuel Macron amplified Russian information operations about the need for NATO to consider “security guarantees” to be given to Russia during putative negotiations in a televised interview on December 3.
- Conditions in eastern Ukraine are likely becoming more conducive to a higher pace of operations as winter sets in.
- The Russian and Belarusian Ministers of Defense met in Minsk likely to further strengthen bilateral security ties between Russia and Belarus.
- Ukrainian forces likely continue to advance northwest of Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, and in western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian authorities reportedly evacuated Russian collaborators from Oleshky.
- The Russian National Guard’s (Rosgvardia) Organizational and Staff Department confirmed that mobilization continues despite Russian President Vladimir Putin’s announcement of the formal end of partial mobilization on October 31.
- Russian authorities are continuing to use judicial measures to consolidate administrative control of occupied territories.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 3, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 2, 9:30 ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russia is attempting to capitalize on the Western desire for negotiations to create a dynamic in which Western officials feel pressed to make preemptive concessions to lure Russia to the negotiating table. Russian President Vladimir Putin held an hour-long telephone conversation with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on December 2 in which Putin falsely stated that Western financial and military aid to Ukraine creates a situation in which the Ukrainian government outright rejects talks between Moscow and Kyiv and called upon Scholz to reconsider Germany's approach regarding developments in Ukraine.<sup>[1]</sup> Scholz stated that any diplomatic solution to the conflict in Ukraine must include the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory.<sup>[2]</sup> The Putin-Scholz call corresponded with a diplomatic overture from US President Joe Biden on December 1 in which Biden stated that he is prepared to speak with Putin if the Russian president is looking for a way to end the war, although Biden acknowledged that he has no immediate plans to do so.<sup>[3]</sup>

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded to Biden's comments on December 2 stating that Biden seems to be demanding the removal of Russian forces from Ukraine as a precondition for negotiations and said that the "special military operation" would continue.[4] Peskov added that America's reluctance to recognize Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories significantly complicates the search for common ground in possible negotiations.[5]

Putin's and Peskov's statements regarding negotiations follow Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's December 1 comments in the context of a meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) repeating precisely the same demand the Kremlin had made of the US and NATO before the February 24 invasion. Lavrov said that Russian officials will be ready to talk with Western officials if the West shows its willingness to discuss the documents Russian officials proposed in December of 2021.[6] The Russian Foreign Ministry published a draft of its "security guarantees" demands of the US and NATO on December 17, 2021, which called for an expansive list of concessions on NATO and Western military actions in Europe, including, as ISW noted at the time, "a moratorium on NATO expansion, a revocation of the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration that Ukraine and Georgia are eligible to become NATO members, a moratorium on establishing military bases on the territory of former Soviet and current non-NATO states, not deploying strike weapons near Russia, and rolling back NATO to its 1997 posture when the Russia–NATO Founding Act was signed."<sup>[7]</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry had issued a statement on February 17 threatening to take "military-technical measures" in response to the refusals by the US and NATO to negotiate on this basis—those military technical measures were the "special military operation" that began a week later.

ISW has previously assessed that Vladimir Putin's rhetoric indicates that he is not interested in negotiating seriously with Ukraine and retains maximalist objectives for the war.<sup>[8]</sup> It is likely that Putin, Lavrov, and Peskov made these statements regarding negotiations to create a perception among Western officials that Russia needs to be lured to negotiate. The Kremlin likely intends to create a dynamic in which Western officials offer Russia preemptive concessions in hopes of convincing Russia to enter negotiations without requiring significant preliminary concessions of Russia in return. Putin's, Lavrov's, and Peskov's statements highlight what some of those desired preemptive concessions may be: decreased Western financial and military aid to Ukraine, recognition of Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory, and restrictions on NATO and Western military actions in Europe. The Kremlin has also kept its language about the subject of negotiations vague, likely in order to convince Western officials to begin negotiation processes without a clear definition of whether negotiations are in pursuit of a ceasefire, a peace process, or a final peace agreement.

Russia would benefit from a temporary agreement with Ukraine and Western countries that creates a pause in hostilities that allows Russia to strengthen the Russian Armed Forces for future military operations in pursuit of maximalist goals in Ukraine.<sup>[9]</sup> **Putin has shown little interest in such a ceasefire, however, and the Kremlin continues to make demands that are tantamount to full Western surrender, suggesting that Putin remains focused on pursuing military victory.**

**Western leaders rebuffed the Kremlin's efforts and reaffirmed their support for Ukraine.** Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron in a joint press conference on December 1 reiterated their commitment to support Ukraine in its war against Russia.<sup>[10]</sup> Biden's and Macron's joint show of support for Ukraine and Scholz's insistence on the complete withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine indicate that France, Germany, and the US are not prepared to offer Russia significant preemptive concessions at this time. Biden added that "the idea that Putin is ever going to defeat Ukraine is beyond comprehension."<sup>[11]</sup>

Russia may be trying to use its coordinated missile-strike campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure and the associated humanitarian situation in Ukraine to add pressure on Western officials to offer preemptive concessions. Putin falsely stated in his call with Scholz that Russia has been left with no choice but to conduct missile strikes on targets in Ukrainian territory.<sup>[12]</sup> Russia may be relying on causing undue human suffering, possibly to generate another wave of refugees, to pressure Western officials to offer preemptive concessions because the Russian military has been unable to achieve strategic success.

**Russia still poses a threat to the Ukrainian energy grid and civilian population despite Ukraine air defense forces' high rates of shooting down Russian missiles and drones at the current level of Ukrainian air defense capabilities.** Ukrainian General Staff Deputy Chief Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov stated that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 72% of 239 Russian cruise missiles and 80% of 80 Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones launched throughout November.<sup>[13]</sup> Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Yuriy Ignat also noted that Ukrainian and Western-provided air defense systems have been "exhausting" Russian missile stockpiles and forcing the Russians to compensate for dwindling high-precision missiles by using inert Kh-55 designed solely to carry nuclear warheads as decoys.<sup>[14]</sup> Ignat, however, stated that the use of Kh-55 missiles alongside other missiles and

drones is also wearing down Ukrainian air defenses. **The small percentage of Russian strikes getting through Ukraine's air defenses are nevertheless having significant effects on Ukrainian critical infrastructure, with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stating that recent strikes had left six million Ukrainians without power ahead of winter.**<sup>[15]</sup>

**Russia will likely continue to target Ukrainian critical infrastructure at least as long as enough Russian weapons can get through to achieve effects.** The UK Ministry of Defense assessed that Russia's Destruction of Critically Important Targets (SODCIT) strategy is not as effective as it would have been during the earlier stages of the war, given that Ukrainians have successfully mobilized society.<sup>[16]</sup> ISW continues to assess that Russian strikes on critical infrastructure are unlikely to break Ukrainian will.

**Additional Western-provided air defense systems are prompting the Russian pro-war community to question the long-term sustainability of the Russian missile campaign.** Several prominent Russian milbloggers noted that the "build-up" of Western air defense systems in Ukraine is complicating Russia's ability to conduct missile strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure and demanded that the Kremlin speed up its missile campaign.<sup>[17]</sup> A milblogger even reiterated Western assessments that current Russian missile strikes will have little effect on the frontlines unless "Russians drop their foolishness" and finish the campaign soon.<sup>[18]</sup> ISW previously reported on similar milblogger concerns over US-provided HIMARS systems, which have allowed Ukrainian forces to conduct successful interdiction campaigns.<sup>[19]</sup> **Such panic among Russian milbloggers highlights the vulnerability of the Russian missile campaign if the West continues to enhance Ukraine's air- and missile-defense capabilities.**

**Russia is setting conditions to negotiate the demilitarization of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) in return for a Ukrainian guarantee of the continued flow of gas to Europe through the Druzhba pipeline, but Russia would likely violate any such agreement and blame Ukraine for not upholding it.** Russian nuclear energy agency Rosatom head Alexei Likhachev stated that international negotiations to establish a safety and security zone around the ZNPP in Enerhodar, Zaporizhzhia Oblast continue, and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General Rafael Grossi stated that he hopes that the IAEA, Russia, and Ukraine will reach an agreement by the end of the year – now less than 30 days away.<sup>[20]</sup> Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on December 2, citing its sources within the Kremlin, that Russia is preparing to withdraw from the ZNPP without withdrawing from the area of Zaporizhzhia Oblast that surrounds the plant but did not specify whether the withdrawal would only apply to military units or would include occupation administrators.<sup>[21]</sup> Such an agreement would likely at least include military personnel and equipment.

The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 1 that Russia is pulling forces and occupation authorities from various parts of occupied Zaporizhzhia Oblast, and Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on December 2 that there are only 500 Russian military personnel at the ZNPP and that withdrawing Russian personnel-planted 300 mines in the industrial zone of Enerhodar.<sup>[22]</sup> *Meduza* reported that the Kremlin expects that Ukraine would guarantee the uninterrupted pumping of gas through the Druzhba pipeline, which will become Russia's main method of transporting gas to Europe on December 5 when the European Union's embargo against water-transported Russian gas comes into effect.<sup>[23]</sup> However, as ISW has previously reported, Russia and its proxies have a long history of violating peace deals brokered with Ukraine and other states, then subsequently blaming the other party and leveraging the blame to fail to uphold Russia's own obligations.<sup>[24]</sup>

**Demilitarizing the ZNPP without a withdrawal of Russian forces from broader western Zaporizhzhia Oblast would not eliminate or diminish the ongoing threat to the ZNPP.** Even if Russia did withdraw both its forces and occupation administration from Enerhodar, Russian forces would still control the surrounding area and would retain the ability to strike all the areas they are currently able to strike, including the ZNPP itself. Rather, so long as the military situation remains unchanged in southern Ukraine, Russia would most likely accuse Ukrainian forces of violating the terms of their agreement and use such accusations to justify a remilitarization of the ZNPP and set longer-term information conditions to falsely undermine Ukraine's ability to safely operate the ZNPP and commit to any future ceasefire or peace agreements.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russia is attempting to capitalize on the Western desire for negotiations to create a dynamic in which Western officials feel obliged to make preemptive concessions to lure Russia to the table.**
- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated as the basis for negotiations precisely the same demands that the Russian Foreign Ministry had made before the February 24**

- invasion, and Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitrii Peskov added the further demand that the West recognize Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory.
- Russian forces still pose a threat to Ukrainian energy infrastructure despite the success of Ukrainian air defenses.
  - Additional Western air defense systems are prompting the Russian pro-war community to question the Russian air campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure.
  - Russian officials are setting conditions to negotiate the demilitarization of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), an agreement upon which Russia would likely renege and that would not eliminate or diminish the ongoing threat to the ZNPP.
  - Ukrainian forces made localized breakthroughs southwest and northwest of Kremenna.
  - Russian forces continued to make minimal advances in the Bakhmut area and conduct offensive operations in the Avdiivka–Donetsk City area.
  - Russian forces may be struggling to properly allocate and deploy forces in rear areas in southern Ukraine due to Ukrainian strikes.
  - Poor logistics, unruly mobilized personnel, and domestic protests continue to prevent the Kremlin from achieving the goals of partial mobilization.
  - Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to attempt to mask military development projects in occupied territories for no obvious reason.

### **[The Long-Term Risks of a Premature Ceasefire in Ukraine](#)**

**[Click here to read the full article.](#)**

By Frederick W. Kagan, Director of the Critical Threats Project and Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute

*The following article was originally published by [CriticalThreats.org](#). The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute supports ISW's daily reporting on the war in Ukraine. CTP Director Frederick W. Kagan leads this supporting effort.*

The wise-seeming counsel of seeking compromise with Russia at a point of high leverage for Ukraine is a dangerous folly now. It merely puts off and makes even more dangerous the risks we fear today. It might make sense to buy time in this way if time favored us. But it does not—time favors our adversaries. Accepting risk now to reduce the risk of worse disaster in the future is the wisest and most prudent course of action for the US, NATO, and Ukraine.

The West faces a choice: it can accept the short-term risks of continuing to support Ukraine's effort to achieve a sustainable and enduring resolution to the current Russian invasion, or it can push for a premature cessation of hostilities that greatly increases the likelihood of renewed Russian aggression on terms far more favorable to Moscow.

The path forward should be clear—the West must prioritize reducing Russia's ability to renew a war that the Kremlin is more likely to win and that would carry the same escalation risks as the current war by helping Ukraine use its position of relative advantage *now* to set conditions to deter future conflict.

### **[Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 1](#)**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

**Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan**

**December 1, 9:00 pm ET**

**Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko continued to set informational conditions to resist Russian pressure to enter the war against Ukraine by claiming that NATO is preparing to attack Belarus. Lukashenko blamed Ukraine and NATO for a growing number of provocations near the Belarus-Ukrainian border and stated that Ukraine is trying to drag NATO forces into the war.

[1] Lukashenko stated that Belarusian officials managed to deter a potential adversary from using military force against Belarus and that NATO is building up forces and intensifying combat training in neighboring countries.[2] The Belarusian Minister of Defense Viktor Khrenin stated that there is no direct preparation for war and that Belarus will only defend its territory.[3] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skibitsky reported that there are no signs of the

formation of a strike group on Belarusian territory.<sup>[4]</sup> Lukashenko and Khrenin likely made the comments to bolster what ISW has previously assessed as an ongoing information operation aimed at fixing Ukrainian forces on the border with Belarus in response to the threat of Belarus entering the war.<sup>[5]</sup> Lukashenko and Khrenin also likely focused the information operation on supposed NATO aggression and provocative activities along the Belarusian border to suggest that the Belarusian military needs to remain in Belarus to defend against potential NATO aggression, and thus set informational conditions for resisting Russian pressure to enter the war in Ukraine. ISW continues to assess that Belarusian entry into the Russian war on Ukraine is extremely unlikely.

#### Key Takeaways

- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko continued to set informational conditions to resist Russian pressure to enter the war against Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued efforts to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued to make incremental gains around Bakhmut and to conduct offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.
- Russian forces continued to conduct defensive measures and move personnel on the east bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian military movements in Zaporizhia Oblast may suggest that Russian forces cannot defend critical areas amidst increasing Ukrainian strikes.
- Russian forces are holding reserves in Crimea to support defensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast and on the east bank of the Dnipro River.
- The Kremlin's financial strain continues to feed domestic unrest.
- Evidence persists regarding the continuation of partial mobilization in the face of low morale and high desertion rates amongst Russian troops.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continued attempts to bolster the Wagner Group's reputation.
- Russian occupation officials continued efforts to integrate occupied territories into the Russian financial and legal spheres.
- Russian forces continued to exploit Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure in support of Russia's war effort in Ukraine.

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#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 30, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian efforts around Bakhmut indicate that Russian forces have fundamentally failed to learn from previous high-casualty campaigns concentrated on objectives of limited operational or strategic significance. Russian forces have continually expended combat strength on small settlements around Bakhmut since the end of May; in the following six months, they have only secured gains on the order of a few kilometers at a time.<sup>[1]</sup> As ISW has previously observed, Russian efforts to advance on Bakhmut have resulted in the continued attrition of Russian manpower and equipment, pinning troops on relatively insignificant settlements for weeks and months at a time.<sup>[2]</sup> This pattern of operations closely resembles the previous Russian effort to take Severodonetsk and Lysychansk earlier in the war. As ISW assessed throughout June and July of this year, Ukrainian forces essentially allowed Russian troops to concentrate efforts on Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, two cities near the Luhansk Oblast border of limited operational and strategic significance, in order to capitalize on the continued degradation of Russian manpower and equipment over the course of months of grinding combat.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian troops eventually captured Lysychansk and Severodonetsk and reached the Luhansk Oblast border, but that tactical success translated to negligible operational benefit as the Russian offensive in the east then culminated. Russian efforts in this area have remained largely stalled along the lines that they reached in early July. Even if Russian troops continue to advance toward and within Bakhmut, and even if they force a controlled Ukrainian withdrawal from the city (as was the case in Lysychansk), Bakhmut itself offers them little operational benefit. The costs associated with six months of brutal, grinding, and attrition-based combat around Bakhmut far outweigh any operational advantage that the Russians can obtain from taking

**Bakhmut.** Russian offensives around Bakhmut, on the other hand, are consuming a significant proportion of Russia's available combat power, potentially facilitating continued Ukrainian counteroffensives elsewhere.

**Russian state nuclear power company Rosatom stated that the former chief engineer of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) has become the new director of the ZNPP.** Rosatom advisor Renat Karchaa announced on November 30 that Yuriy Chernichuk has become the new ZNPP director and the first deputy general director of the Joint Stock Company "Operating Organization of the ZNPP," which is the entity that Rosatom formed on October 3 to essentially replace Ukrainian company Energoatom as the plant's operator and to oversee the "safe operation" of the ZNPP and manage personnel activities within the plant.[4] Karchaa also noted that the entire management company of the ZNPP is formed of existing members of ZNPP staff who have signed a new employment contract.[5] Rosatom's direct role in appointing and overseeing ZNPP management is consistent with previous efforts to install and maintain Russian control of the ZNPP in a way that is likely intended to force the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to *de facto* accept Russian claims over the plant by interacting with Russian-controlled ZNPP staff.[6]

**The Kremlin continues efforts to stifle domestic dissent through legislation that broadens the definition of "foreign agents" and those amenable to foreign influence.** Russian media began reporting on November 23 that the Russian government approved new restrictions on the ability of those deemed "foreign agents" to post materials created by foreign-influenced sources and conduct public activities, which will enter into effect on December 1.[7] The Russian Ministry of Justice expanded the list of "individual-foreign agents" on November 27 on the basis of those individuals conducting unspecified political activities.[8] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) also noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin has approved amendments to the 2012 "Foreign Agents Law" that extends the original definition of "foreign agents" to anyone who is under undefined "influence or pressure" from foreign actors.[9] The amendments also afford the Russian Ministry of Justice the purview to publish the personal details of designated foreign agents, opening them up to public harassment.[10] These measures are likely intended to crack down on increasing instances of domestic dissent about the Kremlin's conduct of the war. By broadening the definition of those classified as foreign agents, the Kremlin can expand its weaponization of this designation to ratchet up censorship measures and exert increased control over the information space.

**The Belarusian Minister of Defense made comments likely in support of ongoing information operations, and some Russian sources reframed those comments so as to place further pressure on Belarusian officials to support Russia's war in Ukraine.** Belarusian Minister of Defense Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin stated on November 30 that the actions of bordering NATO members suggest that preparations are underway to conduct military operations in the eastern direction (i.e., against Belarus).[11] While Khrenin's comments incorporate several possible types of military operations, Russian media and a milblogger reported his comments as saying explicitly that NATO is preparing for offensive operations in the eastern direction (which is a nonsensical accusation).[12] Khrenin likely made the comments about NATO military activities on the borders with Belarus in support of what ISW has previously assessed is an ongoing information operation aimed at fixing Ukrainian forces on the border with Belarus in response to the threat of Belarus entering the war.[13] ISW has also previously assessed that Belarus is highly unlikely to enter the war.[14] Russian sources likely framed Khrenin's comments to be more inflammatory in order to support the information operation about Belarus entering the war but also to set more escalatory information conditions that may place more pressure on Belarusian officials to further support the Russian offensive campaign in Ukraine.

**Russian opinion polling suggests that the Russian public may be tiring of Russia's war in Ukraine.** Russian opposition media outlet *Meduza* reported on November 30 that it had gained access to the results of an opinion poll commissioned by the Kremlin for internal use that shows that 55 percent of Russians favor peace talks with Ukraine and 25 percent favor continuing the war.[15] Russian independent polling organization *Levada's* October polling shows a similar breakdown with 34 percent favoring continuing military actions in Ukraine and 57 percent favoring negotiations.[16] Internal Kremlin polling reportedly placed the percentage of Russians supporting negotiations with Ukraine at 32 percent in July and the percentage favoring the continuation of the war at 57 percent.[17] *Meduza* reported that the director of the Levada Center Denis Volkov stated that the share of Russians likely to support peace talks with Ukraine began to grow rapidly following Russian President Vladimir Putin's partial mobilization decree.[18] Disruptions associated with partial mobilization and Russian setbacks on the battlefield have likely contributed to an increasing war weariness among the Russian public, as reflected in the polling.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian military's efforts around Bakhmut suggest that Russian forces failed to learn from previous costly campaigns focused on operationally insignificant settlements.
  - Russian state nuclear company Rosenergoatom appointed a new director for the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
  - The Kremlin continues efforts to stifle domestic dissent through an expansion of measures ostensibly aimed against "foreign agents."
  - Russian opinion polling suggests that the Russian public may be growing tired of Russia's war in Ukraine.
  - Russian forces continued efforts to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
  - Russia forces continued to make incremental gains around Bakhmut and to conduct offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.
  - A Ukrainian official acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are conducting an operation on the Kinburn Spit.
  - Russian and Ukrainian sources indicated that Russian officials are continuing to conduct partial mobilization measures.
  - Russian officials' ongoing efforts to integrate illegally annexed territories into the Russian Federation are likely very disorganized.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Angela Howard, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 29, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces made marginal gains around Bakhmut on November 29, but Russian forces remain unlikely to have advanced at the tempo that Russian sources claimed. Geolocated footage shows that Russian forces made marginal advances southeast of Bakhmut but ISW remains unable to confirm most other claimed gains around Bakhmut made since November 27.<sup>[1]</sup> Some Russian milbloggers made unsubstantiated claims that Russian forces broke through the Ukrainian defensive line south of Bakhmut along the T0513 highway to advance towards Chasiv Yar, which would cut one of two remaining main Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Bakhmut, but such claims are likely part of a continuing Russian information operation and are premature, as ISW has previously assessed.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW continues to assess that the degraded Russian forces around Bakhmut are unlikely to place Bakhmut under threat of imminent encirclement rapidly.<sup>[3]</sup>

The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on November 29 that Russian forces have likely stopped deploying battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the past three months.<sup>[4]</sup> The UK MoD stated that the BTGs' relatively low allocation of infantry, decentralized distribution of artillery, and the limited independence of BTG decision-making hindered their success in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> ISW assessed starting in April that Russian BTGs were degraded in various failed or culminated Russian offensives, including the attacks on Kyiv, Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and Lysychansk, and later efforts to reconstitute these BTGs to restore their combat power have failed.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian forces have likely since thrown their remaining combat power and new personnel, including mobilized personnel, into poorly trained, equipped, and organized ad hoc structures with low morale and discipline.<sup>[7]</sup> The structure of BTGs and the way the Russian military formed them by breaking up doctrinal battalions, regiments, and brigades likely deprived the Russians of the ability to revert to doctrinal organizations, as ISW has previously assessed, so that the Russians must now rely on ad-hoc structures with mobilized personnel.<sup>[8]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces made marginal gains around Bakhmut on November 29, but Russian forces remain unlikely to have advanced at the tempo that Russian sources claimed.
- The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that Russian forces have likely stopped deploying battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the past three months, supporting

ISW's prior assessments.

- Russian forces continued to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations around Svatove as Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations around Svatove and Kremenna.
  - Russian forces continued limited ground attacks west of Kremenna to regain lost positions.
  - Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Siversk and Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
  - Russian forces continued strengthening defensive positions in eastern Kherson Oblast as Ukrainian forces continued striking Russian force concentrations in southern Ukraine.
  - Russian forces continued to struggle with outdated equipment and domestic personnel shortages amid official actions indicative of a probable second wave of mobilization.
  - An independent investigation found that Russia may have transported thousands of Ukrainian prisoners from penal colonies in occupied Ukraine to Russia following the withdrawal from the west bank of Kherson Oblast.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 28, 6:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Recent claims of Russian gains around Bakhmut on November 27 and 28 do not portend an imminent Russian encirclement of Bakhmut.** Geolocated imagery shows that Russian forces likely captured Ozarianivka (a village about 15km southwest of Bakhmut) around November 27 and 28. [1] Multiple Russian sources claimed that Russian forces also captured Kurdiumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut), Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), Zelenopillia (13km south of Bakhmut), Pidhorodne (5km northeast of Bakhmut) and Spirne (30km northeast of Bakhmut) with the intention of encircling Bakhmut from the south and east.[2] There is no open-source evidence supporting these claims at this time. Russian sources have notably propagated spurious claims regarding gains around Bakhmut as part of a continued information operation since October, and recent unsubstantiated territorial claims may be part of this continued information operation.[3] However, even if Russian forces have indeed succeeded in taking control of settlements south of Bakhmut, these gains do not threaten the critical T0513 (Bakhmut-Siversk) and T0504 (Bakhmut-Kostyantynivka) routes that serve as major Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) into Bakhmut. There is also a network of smaller village roads that connect to Bakhmut via the city's northwest. The claimed Russian positions closest to Bakhmut in Klishchiivka and Pidhorodne lead directly into prepared Ukrainian defenses in Bakhmut and its western and northern satellite villages. Russian forces in Klishchiivka, in order to advance any further, would have to cross three kilometers of fields with little cover and concealment. Russian troops, in their current degraded state, are likely unable to be able to accomplish this task quickly. Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin himself observed in October that Wagner forces operating in the Bakhmut area advance only 100–200 meters a day.[4] Russian claimed advances around Bakhmut over the course of November 27 and 28 are thus unlikely to generate operational-level effects and certainly not quickly.

**Recent Russian force deployments to Belarus in November 2022 are likely part of a Russian effort to augment Russian training capacity and conduct an information operation targeted at Ukraine and the West — not to prepare to attack Ukraine from the north again.** Satellite imagery from mid-November indicates an increase in Russian equipment, particularly main battle tanks, at the 230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, including at least one brigade's worth of equipment observed at the training ground on November 20.[5] Independent Belarusian monitoring organization *The Hajun Project* reported on November 28 that Russian forces transferred 15 Tor-M2 surface-to-air missile systems and 10 pieces of unspecified engineering equipment towards Brest.[6] These deployments likely support Russian training efforts and are not preparing for combat from Belarus. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on November 28 that it assesses Russian forces will transfer unspecified elements ("some units") from Belarus to an

unspecified area after the units “acquire combat capabilities.”[7] This statement supports several ISW assessments that combat losses among Russian trainers and the stresses of mobilization have reduced Russia’s training capacity, likely increasing Russia’s reliance on Belarusian training capacity. [8] The Ukrainian General Staff additionally noted on November 28 that it has not observed indicators of Russia forming offensive groups near Ukraine’s northern border regions.[9]

The Kremlin also likely seeks to use these Russian force deployments in Belarus as an information operation to promote paralysis in Kyiv and fix Ukrainian forces around Kyiv to prevent their use in the south and east. Belarusian forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine as ISW has assessed.

[10] Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate representative Andrii Yusov stated on November 28 that the Kremlin is spreading information about an alleged forthcoming Belarusian attack on Ukraine.[11]

**Russian milbloggers widely criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense’s (MoD) decision to place severe customs limits on the import of dual-use goods, demonstrating their continued and pervasive discontent with the Russian MoD’s conduct of the war in Ukraine.** Various milbloggers noted on November 27 that the Russian MoD has instituted tighter customs controls on a variety of dual-use goods (goods with both non-military and military function that can be purchased by civilians) such as quadcopters, heat packs, sights, clothing, and shoes, all of which are items that Russian civilians have been crowdfunding and donating to Russian soldiers in the wake of widespread issues with adequately equipping of mobilized recruits.[12] Russian sources noted that this puts Russian troops in a bad position because it undermines the ability of civil society organizations to fill the gap left by the Russian MoD in providing troops with basic equipment.[13] While the customs limits are reportedly intended to centralize and consolidate government control and oversight of the provision of dual-use goods, the decision ultimately undermines campaigns led by elements of Russian civil society, as well as many prominent Russian milbloggers, to provide direct support to Russian recruits, thus further putting the MoD at odds with prominent social actors.

**Russian forces are likely preparing to launch a new wave of missile strikes across Ukraine in the coming week, but such preparations are likely intended to sustain the recent pace of strikes instead of escalating it due to continued constraints on Russia’s missile arsenal.** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned in his nightly address on November 27 that Russian forces are preparing a new wave of strikes.[14] Spokesperson for Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command Nataliya Humenyuk relatedly noted that an additional Russian missile carrier went on duty in the Black Sea on November 28, which Humenyuk stated is an indicator of preparations for a renewed wave of massive missile strikes over the course of the coming week. [15] Russian milbloggers also claimed that the current Russian aviation and sea grouping means Russian forces will mount another series of missile strikes in the coming days.[16] However, due to the continued degradation of the Russian missile arsenal over the course of previous strikes, it is likely that Russia seeks to sustain, as opposed to escalate, the current pace of strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure.

**Increased speculation in the Russian information space about Russian preparations to withdraw from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) prompted a Kremlin response on November 28.** Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov denied claims on November 28 that Russian forces were preparing to leave the ZNPP following statements by the head of Ukrainian nuclear energy agency Energoatom, Petro Kotin, on November 27 that Russian forces are preparing to leave, but that it is too soon to tell whether they will leave the plant.[17] The Enerhodar Russian occupation administration also denied these rumors and claimed that Russian nuclear energy agency Rosatom’s plan to build an alternate energy source for the ZNPP is an indicator of long-term occupation.[18] Such responses from both the occupation administration and the Kremlin itself indicate the pervasiveness of this narrative and the value the Kremlin places on countering it.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian-claimed capture of several small villages around Bakhmut on November 27 and 28 does not portend an imminent Russian encirclement of Bakhmut.
- Recent Russian force deployments to Belarus in November 2022 are likely part of a Russian effort to augment Russian training capacity and conduct an information operation.
- Russian milbloggers widely criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense’s (MoD) decision to place severe customs limits on the import of dual-use goods, indicating a continued and pervasive discontent with the Russian MoD’s conduct of the war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces are likely preparing to launch a new wave of missile strikes across Ukraine in the coming week, but such preparations are likely intended to sustain the recent pace of strikes rather than increase it.

- Russian forces continued efforts to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations around Svatove as Russian sources reported that Ukrainian troops continued counteroffensive west of Kremenna.
  - Russian forces made incremental gains south of Bakhmut.
  - Russian forces continued to strengthen fortified positions and establish security measures in eastern Kherson Oblast.
  - Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian military assets and along critical logistics lines in southern Ukraine.
  - Russian forces continue to face issues with adequate training and equipment and challenges with morale and discipline as Russian military failures have significant domestic social impacts.
  - Russian occupation authorities continued efforts to facilitate the integration of educational systems in occupied Ukraine into the Russian system.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Grace Mappes and Frederick W. Kagan

November 27, 5:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, November 27. This report evaluates the defensive positions Russian forces are establishing in eastern Kherson Oblast and what those positions suggest about Russian expectations for future operations in this area.

The Russian military clearly assesses that Ukrainian forces could cross the Dnipro River and conduct counter-offensive operations in eastern Kherson Oblast, possibly threatening all of the critical ground lines of communications (GLOCs) from Crimea to the mainland. Russian forces have been digging trenchlines and concentration areas in eastern Kherson since early October 2022 in obvious preparation for the withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River and Kherson City.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian troops are preparing either to defend in depth or to conduct operational or strategic delay operations. Russian forces clearly do not expect to be able to prevent Ukrainian forces from getting across the river, nor are the Russians prioritizing defensive positions to stop such a crossing. The Russian military is setting conditions for a protracted defense in eastern Kherson Oblast that could allow the establishment of a solid Ukrainian lodgment on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River. The assessment that follows examines the Russian defensive laydown and evaluates the expectations for the flow of operations likely guiding that laydown exclusively. **This assessment makes no effort to determine whether Ukrainian forces intend to cross or are capable of crossing the Dnipro River in this region and offers no forecast about whether or not they will make any such attempt.**

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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 26, 3:45pm ET

The overall pace of operations along the frontline has slowed in recent days due to deteriorating weather conditions but is likely to increase starting in the next few weeks as temperatures drop and the ground freezes throughout the theater. Ukrainian and Russian reporting from critical frontline areas throughout eastern and southern Ukraine, including Svatove, Bakhmut, and Vuhledar, indicates that operations on both sides are currently bogged down by heavy rain and resulting heavy mud.<sup>[1]</sup> Temperatures are forecasted to drop throughout Ukraine over the next week, which will likely freeze the ground and expedite the pace of fighting as mobility increases

for both sides. The temperature in areas in Ukraine's northeast, such as along the Svatove-Kreminna line, will dip to near-or-below-freezing daily highs between November 28 and December 4. It will likely take the ground some days of consistent freezing temperatures to solidify, which means that ground conditions are likely to be set to allow the pace of operations to increase throughout Ukraine over the course of the weekend of December 3-4 and into the following week. It is unclear if either side is actively planning or preparing to resume major offensive or counter-offensive operations at that time, but the meteorological factors that have been hindering such operations will begin lifting.

**Russian officials are continuing efforts to deport children to Russia under the guise of medical rehabilitation schemes and adoption programs.** The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on November 26 that the Russian occupation administration in Luhansk Oblast conducted medical examinations of 15,000 children between the ages of two and 17 and found that 70% of the children (10,500) are in need of "special medical care" that requires them to be removed to Russia for "treatment."<sup>[2]</sup> The Resistance Center stated that Russian officials intend these forced deportation schemes to lure children's families to Russia to collect their children after the children receive treatments, at which point the Resistance Center assessed Russian officials will prevent those families from returning home to Ukraine. The Center's report is consistent with ISW's previous assessment that Russian officials are conducting a deliberate depopulation campaign in occupied Ukrainian territories.<sup>[3]</sup>

Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova additionally posted an excerpt from a documentary film chronicling the story of the children she adopted from Mariupol.<sup>[4]</sup> Lvova-Belova has largely been at the forefront of the concerted Russian effort to remove Ukrainian children from Ukrainian territory and adopt them into Russian families, which may constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention as well as a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign.<sup>[5]</sup> Lvova-Belova's documentary is likely meant to lend legitimacy to the ongoing adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families, just as the guise of medical necessity is likely intended to justify mass deportations of Ukrainian children to Russian territory.

**Russian officials may be attempting to counterbalance the influence of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin through the promotion of other parallel military structures.** The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 26 that Russian officials appointed a Viktor Yanukovych-linked, pro-Kremlin businessman, Armen Sarkisyan, as the new administrator for prisons in Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine and that Sarkisyan intends to use the role to create a new "private military company."<sup>[6]</sup> The GUR reported that Sarkisyan modeled his effort to create a new private military company on the Wagner Group's recruitment of prisoners in the Russian Federation and that Russian-Armenian businessman Samvel Karapetyan is sponsoring the effort.<sup>[7]</sup> Karapetyan is the owner of Tashir Holding company, a longtime subcontractor for Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom.<sup>[8]</sup> The GUR reported that Sarkisyan's attempt to create a new private military structure is an attempt to create a counterweight to Prigozhin's de facto monopoly in the field of Russian private military companies.<sup>[9]</sup> It is likely that high-ranking Russian officials have approved Sarkisyan's efforts as private military companies are illegal in Russia.

Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov reported that he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on November 25 and claimed that they discussed the participation of Chechen units in the war in Ukraine and the creation of new Russian military and Rosgvardia units comprised of Chechen personnel.<sup>[10]</sup> ISW has previously reported that Kadyrov routinely promotes his efforts to create Chechen-based parallel military structures.<sup>[11]</sup> Russian officials may be further promoting Kadyrov's existing parallel military structures and Sarkisyan's efforts to create a private military company to counteract the growing influence of Prigozhin, whom ISW has previously assessed uses his own parallel military structures to establish himself as a central figure in the Russian pro-war ultranationalist community.<sup>[12]</sup>

**Russian forces are likely using inert Kh-55 cruise missiles in their massive missile strike campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, further highlighting the depletion of the Russian military's high precision weapons arsenal.** The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on November 26 that Russia is likely removing nuclear warheads from ageing Kh-55 missiles and launching the missiles without warheads at targets in Ukraine.<sup>[13]</sup> The UK MoD suggested that Russian forces are likely launching the inert missiles as decoys to divert Ukrainian air defenses.<sup>[14]</sup> Ukrainian officials have previously reported that Russian forces have extensively used the non-nuclear variant of the missile system, the Kh-555, to conduct strikes on critical Ukrainian infrastructure since mid-October.<sup>[15]</sup> The Russian military's likely use of a more strategic weapon system in the role of a decoy for Ukrainian air defenses corroborates ISW's previous reporting that the Russian military has significantly depleted its arsenal of high-precision missiles.<sup>[16]</sup> The use of more strategic weapons systems in support of the campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure suggests that

the Russian military is heavily committed to the strike campaign and still mistakenly believes that it can generate strategically significant effects through that campaign.

#### Key Takeaways

- The overall pace of operations in Ukraine is likely to increase in the upcoming weeks as the ground freezes throughout the theater.
  - Russian officials are continuing efforts to deport Ukrainian children to Russia.
  - Russian officials may be trying to counteract Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's growing influence through the promotion of other parallel Russian military structures.
  - Russian forces are likely using inert Kh-55 missiles designed solely to carry nuclear warheads in its campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure, highlighting the Russian military's depletion of high-precision weapons.
  - Russian forces continued defensive operations against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
  - Russian forces continued offensive operations in the directions of Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
  - Russian forces continued establishing fortifications in eastern Kherson Oblast.
  - Russian tactical, logistical, and equipment failures continue to decrease morale of Russian troops and drive searches for scapegoats.
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#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 25, 9:00pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Reports of poorly staffed, provisioned, and supplied Russian mobilized personnel are dividing the Russian information space, exposing the tension between milblogger mobilization narratives, Wagner Group narratives, and actual Russian efforts to alleviate morale issues. Mobilized personnel from Serpukhov, Moscow Oblast, claimed on November 23 that the Russian military command sent them into battle without proper training, uniforms, or protective gear, leading them to suffer mass casualties. These personnel also claimed that command only feeds the mobilized personnel once a day despite having enough food to provide more meals.<sup>[1]</sup> A Russian source reported that the Serpukhov mobilized personnel now face a military tribunal for desertion, but the men later released a second video denying that they are deserters and stating they are willing to serve on the second and third lines of defense rather than the front line.<sup>[2]</sup>

Russian milblogger responses split between calling for compassion for the mobilized personnel and punishment only for leadership, and punishment for the entire unit. A Russian milblogger claimed that these Russian personnel abandoned their positions in Makiivka, Luhansk Oblast, and left other members of their unit to be executed when surrendering to Ukrainian forces (an accusation that the Ukrainian government is investigating).<sup>[3]</sup> Some Russian milbloggers, including at least one channel affiliated with the Wagner Group, sympathized with the Serpukhov personnel and criticized the Russian training and command issues that led to this situation.<sup>[4]</sup> These milbloggers also criticized other Russian milbloggers who, they say, wrongfully condemned the Serpukhov personnel for Russian military command, training, and provisioning issues out of their control. One Russian milblogger even claimed that military personnel do not refuse to fight, but that they do not want to be "cannon fodder."<sup>[5]</sup> Alexander "Sasha" Kots, a milblogger whom Russian President Vladimir Putin recently appointed to the Russian Human Rights Council, called for objectivity when viewing the video and said he would raise the issue with Putin in his new position on the Human Rights Council.<sup>[6]</sup> However, some milbloggers still criticized Kots for being too soft on the Serpukhov personnel and called for increasingly harsh penalties.<sup>[7]</sup> The mixed responses from milbloggers with various Kremlin and external affiliations about ongoing mobilization issues further illustrates the extent of the erosion of Russian morale and the increase in confusion among the pro-war Russian nationalist community resulting from poorly-executed mobilization and other force generation efforts.

Russian President Vladimir Putin falsely presented a meeting with 18 hand-picked women holding influential positions in the Russian political sphere as an open discussion with the

**mothers of mobilized personnel on November 25, two days before Russian Mother's Day.**

[8] Russian media publicized the meeting in an apparent attempt to assuage discontent from relatives of the mobilized and appeals from genuine mothers' and wives' groups.[9] Putin used the meeting to pledge to improve conditions for the mobilized, to call on Russians to distrust unfavorable media reports surrounding mobilization, and to display solidarity with the families of Russian soldiers.

[10] Meanwhile, the calls of relatives of Russian soldiers have reportedly not received a response. A Russian news channel posted a video on November 24 in which a Russian woman claims that authorities will not meet with her even though she has been looking for her soldier son who disappeared in March.[11] The Council of Mothers and Wives posted that unidentified individuals began to surveil their members following their November 21 announcement of a roundtable discussion to consider the problems facing conscripts.[12] YouTube channel Moms of Russia posted a video appeal to Putin in which several mothers asked Putin to prevent the mobilization of their only child. [13] ISW saw no evidence of a response to the video from Putin. The Council of Mothers and Wives reportedly also expressed the belief that the invitation to Putin's meeting of mothers only applied to specially selected individuals.[14]

**An investigation by *Forbes*' Ukrainian service revealed the extent of the financial strains that the war in Ukraine has imposed on Russia's annual budget.** *Forbes* found that Russia has spent \$82 billion dollars on the first nine months of the war in Ukraine, amounting to one quarter of its entire 2021 annual budget of \$340 billion.[15] The investigation emphasized the impact that mobilization had on military-related expenditures since October and observed that providing for the 300,000 mobilized cost an additional \$1.8 billion per month in addition to the increased costs of providing ammunition, equipment, and salaries to mobilized recruits, which in total amounted to a \$2.7 billion increase following mobilization. ISW has previously reported on the detrimental effects of mobilization and the Kremlin's overall war effort on the Russian federal budget.[16] In addition to the massive impact the first nine months of the war have had on the federal budget, ISW has also observed that local Russian administrations on the regional level have disproportionately borne the brunt of mobilization in a way that will continue to have reverberating social and financial impacts into 2023.[17]

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may have increased the frequency of prisoner of war (POW) exchanges in an attempt to soothe discontent in the information space regarding its prior failures to negotiate the return of Russian POWs.** Russian and Ukrainian sources reported three concurrent POW exchanges between November 23 and 25. Russian and Ukrainian officials exchanged 35 Russian POWs for 35 Ukrainian POWs on November 23, 50 Russian POWs for 50 Ukrainian POWs on November 24, and nine Russian POWs for nine Ukrainian POWs on November 25.[18] The frequency of POW exchanges over the past few days is an inflection in itself- the Russian MoD has been notably restrained in the conduct of such exchanges and has faced significant criticism over its apparent lack of regard for Russian POWs in recent months.[19] The increased frequency of POW exchanges is likely meant partially to address discontent from Russian milbloggers, who reported on the most recent series of exchanges with a relatively neutral tone and emphasized the equal ratio of exchange.[20]

**A Ukrainian official confirmed that Ukrainian forces killed Iranian advisors in Russian-occupied Crimea in October and stressed that Ukraine would target any Iranian military presence on Ukrainian territory.** Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov confirmed that Ukrainian forces killed the Iranian military advisors in a November 24 interview with *the Guardian*.[21] Danilov did not specify how many Iranian advisors Ukrainian forces killed, but an October 10 *Jerusalem Post* report put the figure at 10 Iranian military advisors.[22] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby confirmed on October 20 that Iranian military personnel are in Russian-occupied Crimea to assist Russian forces in operating Iranian-made drone in attacks on Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure.[23] Danilov also threatened that Ukrainian forces would target any Iranian military presence on Ukrainian territory.[24] The confirmation and threat will likely not dissuade Iran from continuing to support Russia through the provision of high-precision weapons systems. ISW has previously assessed that Iran may be supplying drones and potentially ballistic missiles to the Russian Federation to more clearly establish an explicit bilateral security relationship with Russia in which they are more equal partners.[25]

**Russian leadership may be distributing a document among Russian servicemembers stating that Russia needs to mobilize five million personnel to win the war in Ukraine, an impossible task for the Russian Federation.** The Ukrainian General Staff Deputy Chief Oleksiy Hromov stated on November 24 that the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation has prepared a document titled "Conclusion of the War with NATO in Ukraine" and has begun distributing it among Russian servicemembers.[26] The document reportedly identifies shortcomings of the Russian Armed Forces and notes the need for Russia to mobilize five million Russians to win the war in Ukraine.[27] It is unclear whether Russian leadership considers the five million figure a possible target or whether it is an unreachable projected force requirement, reasonable or not, that suggests that they cannot achieve

their objectives in Ukraine. Russia's chaotic and ineffective conduct of partial mobilization with the target of 300,000 mobilized personnel suggests that the mobilization of five million Russians is an impossible task for the Russian Federation. Russian leadership may have drafted and distributed the document in the fashion of Soviet-style after-action reports that deflect responsibility from the overarching strategic leadership failures of the war and place culpability for failure on the operational and tactical failures of the Russian military. Hromov, however, provided no additional details and ISW has been unable to obtain any corroboration or independent reporting about the document.

#### Key Takeaways

- Reports of a group of understaffed and ill-supplied mobilized personnel are dividing the Russian information space.
- President Vladimir Putin falsely presented a meeting with hand-picked women as an open discussion with mothers of mobilized personnel.
- An investigation by *Forbes'* Ukrainian service revealed that the war in Ukraine has had a serious financial impact on the Russian Federation's annual budget.
- The Russian MoD may have increased the frequency of POW exchanges to soothe discontent in the Russian information space.
- A Ukrainian official confirmed that Ukrainian forces killed Iranian military advisors in Russian-occupied Crimea and threatened to target Iranian military presence on Ukrainian territory.
- Russian military leadership may be circulating a document stating that Russia needs to mobilize five million personnel to win the war in Ukraine, which Russia cannot do.
- Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks to regain lost positions northwest of Svatove and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations toward Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas, and influential Russian figures may be setting informational conditions to deflect blame for a lack of progress in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces continued to establish defenses south of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast and around critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) connecting Crimea to southern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources and officials continue attempts to shape the narrative around a likely second partial mobilization while denying the potential for general mobilization.
- Russian officials are continuing efforts to stimulate demographic change in occupied areas of Ukraine by deporting Ukrainian residents and replacing them with imported Russian citizens.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 23, 6:45 ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian military conducted another set of massive, coordinated missile strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure in a misguided attempt to degrade the Ukrainian will to fight. Ukrainian Air Force Command reported on November 23 that Russian forces launched 70 cruise missiles and five drones at Ukrainian critical infrastructure targets.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 51 of the Russian cruise missiles and all five drones. <sup>[2]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces struck residential buildings, thermal power plants, and substations in the city of Kyiv as well as in Kyiv, Vinnytsia, Lviv, and Zaporizhia oblasts.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian, Russian, and social media sources claimed that Russian forces also struck targets in Ivano-Frankivsk, Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Cherkasy, Dnipropetrovsk, Sumy, Poltava, Kirovohrad, and Kharkiv oblasts.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian officials reported widespread disruptions to energy, heating, and water supplies as a result of the Russian strikes.<sup>[5]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that the Russian military is still able to attack Ukrainian critical infrastructure at scale in the near term despite continuing to deplete its arsenal of high-precision weapons systems.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that the Russian military mistakenly believes that the destruction of energy infrastructure will direct Ukrainian efforts to protect rear areas and divert Ukrainian attention

away from the front in eastern and southern Ukraine.[7] Malyar stated that Russia's campaign against critical infrastructure will not weaken the motivation of Ukraine's civilian population, and the Ukrainian Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov asserted that Russian missile and drone strikes will not coerce Ukraine into negotiations.[8]

**Prominent Russian politicians continue to promote openly genocidal rhetoric against Ukraine.** Moscow City Duma Deputy and pro-Kremlin journalist Andrey Medvedev posted a long rant to his Telegram channel on November 23 wherein he categorically denied the existence of the Ukrainian nation, relegating Ukrainian identity to a "political orientation." [9] Medvedev called Ukraine a pagan cult of death that worships prisoner executions and called for the total "liquidation of Ukrainian statehood in its current form." [10] This rhetoric is openly exterminatory and dehumanizing and calls for the conduct of a genocidal war against the Ukrainian state and its people, which notably has pervaded discourse in the highest levels of the Russian political mainstream. As ISW has previously reported, Russian President Vladimir Putin has similarly employed such genocidal language in a way that is fundamentally incompatible with calls for negotiations.[11]

**The Kremlin has not backed down from its maximalist goals of regaining control of Ukraine but is rather partially obfuscating Russia's aims to mislead Western countries into pressuring Ukraine to sue for peace.** Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on November 21 that changing the current government in Ukraine is not a goal of the Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine, observing that Russian President Vladimir Putin "has already spoken about this." [12] Putin had said on October 26 that Ukraine has "lost its sovereignty" and come fully under NATO's control. [13] Putin's speech at the Valdai Discussion Club on October 27 again rejected Ukraine's sovereignty, noting that Russia "created" Ukraine and that the "single real guarantee of Ukrainian sovereignty" can only be Russia. [14] Putin has also consistently upheld his talking point that Ukraine is a Nazi state that must be "denazified." [15] Putin's demands amount to a requirement for regime change in Kyiv even if he does not explicitly call for it in these recent statements. The fact that Peskov refers back to these comments by Putin makes reading any serious walking-back of Russian aims into Peskov's comments highly dubious.

**The Kremlin's obfuscation of its aims likely intended for a Western audience is nevertheless confusing Russian war supporters.** Peskov's statement likely aimed to mitigate the effects of Vice-Speaker of the Russian Federation Council Konstantin Kosachev's pro-war rant declaring that Russia can only normalize relations with Ukraine following the capitulation of the Ukrainian government. [16] The two contrasting statements confused the pro-war community. A Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger sarcastically observed that Russia is aimlessly fighting a war without a clear goal in response to Peskov's statement. [17] ISW has reported on similar reactions to the Kremlin's decision to exchange Ukrainian prisoners of war from Mariupol, whom Kremlin officials and propagandists vilified as "Nazis" and "war criminals." [18]

**The Kremlin's hesitation to publicly commit fully to an extreme nationalist ideology and to the war is also bewildering propagandists who preach such ideology to the Russian masses.** Russian political and military "experts" on a Russian state TV show pushed back against Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov's claim that Kherson Oblast is fully Russian, which would justify the use of nuclear weapons. [19] The "experts" said that the use of nuclear weapons to defend territory that is not fully occupied is irrational and even said that NATO poses no threat to Russia. Russian propagandists have been making outlandish nuclear threats and accusing NATO of planning to attack Russia throughout Putin's regime and especially before and during the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine; such dismissal of common Kremlin talking points in such a forum is unprecedented. [20] ISW has also previously reported that Russian extreme nationalist ideologist Alexander Dugin accused Putin of not fully committing to the pro-war ideology. [21] Putin has generally sought to balance extreme nationalist talking points to gather support from the nationalist-leaning community and a more moderate narrative to maintain the support of the rest of the Russian population. Russian military failures and the increasing sacrifices Putin is demanding of the Russian people to continue his disastrous invasion are bringing his deliberate obfuscation of war aims and attempts to balance rhetorically into sharp relief, potentially fueling discontent within critical constituencies.

### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian military conducted another set of massive, coordinated missile strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure.
- Russian politicians continue to promote openly genocidal rhetoric against Ukraine.

- The Kremlin continues to pursue its maximalist goals and is likely issuing vague statements about its intent to mislead Western Countries into pressuring Ukraine into negotiations.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the directions of Kreminna and Svatove.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin is continuing crypto-mobilization efforts at the expense of other Russian security services.
- Russian forces and occupation officials continued to forcibly relocate residents and confiscate their property.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 22, 8:30 ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin appears to be setting information conditions for a false-flag attack in Belgorod Oblast, Russia, likely in an effort to regain public support for the war in Ukraine. Kremlin propagandists have begun hypothesizing that Ukrainian forces seek to invade Belgorod Oblast, and other Russian sources noted that Russian forces need to regain control over Kupyansk, Kharkiv Oblast, to minimize the threat of a Ukrainian attack.<sup>[1]</sup> These claims have long circulated within the milblogger community, which had criticized the Russian military command for abandoning buffer positions in Vovchansk in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast following the Russian withdrawal from the region in September.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian milbloggers have also intensified their calls for Russia to regain liberated territories in Kharkiv Oblast on November 22, stating that such preemptive measures will stop Ukrainians from carrying out assault operations in the Kupyansk and Vovchansk directions.<sup>[3]</sup> Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov also published footage showcasing the construction of the Zasechnaya Line fortifications on the Ukraine-Belgorod Oblast border.<sup>[4]</sup> Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin clarified that Wagner is building the Zasechnaya Line after having changed its name from Wagner Line because "many people in [Russia] do not like the activity of private military company Wagner."<sup>[5]</sup> Private military companies are illegal in Russia.

Russian claims of an imminent Ukrainian attack on Belgorod Oblast are absurd and only aim to scare the general public to support the war. Ukraine has no strategic interest in invading Russia and no ability to do so at such a scale. Ukrainian forces are continuing to liberate occupied settlements in western Luhansk Oblast following their victory in northern Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[6]</sup> Support for Russia's nonsensical invasion is declining among Russian residents of border regions and the rest of the country as a result of mobilization and military failures. Russian opposition outlets reported that relatives of mobilized men have ignited protests in 15 Russian regions since the end of October, with the most notable ones taking place in regions bordering Ukraine.<sup>[7]</sup> A Russian opposition outlet, *Meduza*, citing two unnamed sources close to the Kremlin, reported that the Russian Presidential Administration carried out an internal survey in different regions where many expressed apathy toward the war.<sup>[8]</sup> While ISW cannot independently verify *Meduza*'s report, emerging calls for demobilization among relatives of mobilized men suggest that Russian propaganda is ineffective in countering the real-life consequences of the war on the society.<sup>[9]</sup>

These ridiculous speculations about a fantastical Ukrainian invasion of Russia may also be part of the Kremlin's effort to acknowledge and appease the Russian pro-war nationalist community. Russian milbloggers have repeatedly accused the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of failing to defend Russia, including the newly annexed territories.<sup>[10]</sup> The Kremlin, however, will unlikely be able to reinvade Kharkiv Oblast as demanded by these nationalist figures.

Prigozhin is also using fearmongering about a fictitious Ukrainian invasion threat and the construction of the Zasechnaya Line to solidify his power in Russian border regions and Russia. Belgorod Oblast officials previously halted the construction of the Wagner Line, and the line's rebranding alongside other Prigozhin projects in St. Petersburg and Kursk Oblast signifies that he will

continue to establish himself in Russia while ostensibly supporting Russian President Vladimir Putin's war.[11]

**The Russian military has significantly depleted its arsenal of high-precision missiles but will likely still be able to attack Ukrainian critical infrastructure at scale in the near term.** Ukrainian Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov released figures on November 22 detailing that the Russian military has only 119 Iskanders missiles, 13 percent of its initial February 2022 arsenal.[12] Reznikov's figures also show that Russian forces have significantly depleted other key high-precision weapons systems with only 229 Kalibr missiles (45 percent of the initial February 2022 stock), 150 Kh-155 missiles (50 percent of the initial February 2022 stock), and 120 Kh-22/32 missiles (32 percent of the initial February 2022 stock) remaining. Reznikov's figures show that Russian forces have substantially depleted stocks of 3M-55 "Onyx", S-300, Kh-101, Kh-35, and Kh-47M2 Kinzhal missiles as well.[13]

Ukrenergo head Volodymyr Kudrytsky stated on November 22 that Russian forces have damaged almost all thermal power plants, large hydropower plants, and Ukrrenergo hub substations in Ukraine. [14] Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated on November 18 that more than half of the Ukrainian power grid has failed as a result of Russian missile strikes.[15] DTEK CEO Maxim Tymchenko urged Ukrainians to leave the country, if possible, on November 19 to ease demand on the Ukrainian power grid, and YASNO CEO Serhiy Kovalenko stated on November 21 that regular power outages will likely last at least until the end of March 2023.[16] Russian forces will likely be able to continue to reduce the overall capacity of Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the near term given the current state of the Ukrainian power grid. The depletion of the Russian military's high-precision missile arsenal will likely prevent it from conducting missile strikes at a high pace, however. ISW continues to assess that the Russian military will fail to achieve its goal of degrading the Ukrainian will to fight through its coordinated campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure.

**The Russian military is likely experiencing problems in replenishing its arsenal of high-precision weapons systems.** Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yuriy Ignat stated on November 21 that Russia is experiencing problems with the supply of Iranian missiles to the Russian Federation.[17] Ignat speculated that diplomatic resources, negotiations, or other countries' influence may have impacted Iran's ability or willingness to supply Russia with ballistic missiles.[18] ISW has previously assessed that Russia is increasingly dependent on Iran for the provision of high-precision weapons systems.[19] Ignat also reported that Russia lacks the necessary components produced abroad to support the manufacturing of the number of missiles it needs for its campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure.[20] Reznikov stated that Russia manufactured 120 Kalibr and Kh-101 missiles and 360 Kh-35 missiles since February 2022, allowing the Russian military to partially offset the heavy use of these weapons systems in massive strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure.[21] Russia likely significantly strained the existing capacity of its military industry in producing these missiles.

**Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko has traveled to Iran to discuss economic cooperation and possibly security ties.** Golovchenko met with Iranian First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber and will likely meet Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and other officials in the coming days.[22] Golovchenko's visit to Tehran follows the Ukrainian Main Directorate of Intelligence reporting on November 17 that Iran may help Belarus produce artillery shells.[23]

**Russian military movements suggest that Russian forces are likely reinforcing positions in eastern Zaporizhia and western Donetsk oblasts.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on November 22 that Chechen and Wagner Group formations deployed to Debaltseve, Donetsk Oblast, and that Russian forces are regrouping individual units in the area of Molchansk, Zaporizhia Oblast (just northeast of Melitopol).[24] Social media sources posted images on November 21 showing Russian trucks and vehicles in Melitopol moving from the south to the north throughout November. [25] Geolocated images show Russian military vehicles moving through Bezimenne and Mariupol in Donetsk Oblast carrying a notable amount of military equipment.[26] ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have begun reinforcing positions in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast with personnel from Kherson Oblast and mobilized personnel.[27] Russian forces may be reinforcing positions in eastern Zaporizhia and western Donetsk oblasts to prepare for perceived threats of future Ukrainian operations or to support the effort to restart the Donetsk offensive.

### **Key Takeaways**

- The Kremlin may be setting information conditions for a false-flag attack in Belgorod Oblast.
- The Russian military has significantly depleted its arsenal of high-precision missiles but will likely still threaten Ukrainian infrastructure.
- The Russian military is likely struggling to replenish its arsenal of high-precision weapons systems.

- The Belarusian prime minister traveled to Iran to discuss economic cooperation and possible security ties.
- Russian military movements suggest that Russian forces are likely reinforcing positions in eastern Zaporizhia and western Donetsk oblasts.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Crimean occupation officials demonstrated heightened unease—likely over Ukrainian strikes on Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in the peninsula and ongoing military operations on the Kinburn Spit.
- The Kremlin continues to deflect concerns about mobilization onto the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Russian sources continue to tout the forced adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Layne Philipson, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 21, 7:45pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Two days of shelling caused widespread damage to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on November 20 and 21. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated on November 21 that there are no immediate nuclear safety and security concerns and that the integrity of all six nuclear reactors and the spent and fresh fuel storage facilities remain uncompromised despite the intense shelling.<sup>[1]</sup> Russia and Ukraine both accused the other of conducting the artillery strikes on the ZNPP on November 20 and 21.<sup>[2]</sup> One Russian milblogger referenced a video of the shelling taken by Chechen forces and stated that it appeared the shelling came from positions in Russian-controlled territory south of the ZNPP, not Ukrainian-controlled territory north of the ZNPP.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian nuclear operator Rosatom Head Alexey Likhachev warned of a nuclear disaster at the ZNPP, and Russian milbloggers largely amplified his statements and called for the transfer of all Ukrainian nuclear power plants to Russian operation.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have staged false flag attacks against the ZNPP and previously reported on Russian forces' unlawful militarization of the ZNPP.<sup>[5]</sup> Artillery strikes themselves are unlikely to penetrate the containment units protecting each nuclear reactor and instead pose a greater threat to the spent nuclear fuel storage facilities, which could leak radioactive material and cause a radiological (as opposed to nuclear) disaster if compromised. The continued conflation of radiological and nuclear accidents and the constant discussion of the threat of disaster at the ZNPP is likely part of a wider Russian information operation meant to undermine Western support for Ukraine and frame Russian control of the plant as essential to avoid nuclear catastrophe in order to consolidate further operational and administrative control of Ukrainian nuclear assets and compel elements of the international community to recognize Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory at least obliquely.

The Russian government is continuing to increase its control of the Russian information space as a Russian milblogger noted that Russian efforts to shape the information space “look like a kitten against a rhinoceros” compared with foreign “think tanks,” non-profit organizations, and “independent media.”<sup>[6]</sup> Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported on November 21 that the Russian State Duma may consider a bill before the end of 2022 on the regulation of online “recommender” algorithms that would ultimately allow the government to turn off specific algorithms.<sup>[7]</sup> The bill is reportedly being developed by Duma Deputy on Information Policy Anton Gorelkin and will include the regulation of social media networks, online cinemas, search engines, and internet marketplaces.<sup>[8]</sup> *Kommersant* noted that this bill will require the owners of all sites and platforms to ensure the government’s ability to fully or partially block the participation of specific users and that these provisions appeared before the beginning of the war in October 2021 to specifically target Western outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube due to the risk of “social conflict.”<sup>[9]</sup> Certain Russian milbloggers responded to the speculation regarding the bill and noted that such recommender algorithms make it harder for nations to disperse propaganda due to the prevalence of accessible and personally tailored information available on the internet.<sup>[10]</sup> The Duma is likely considering this bill in an attempt to address a consistent point of neuralgia in the Kremlin’s

ability to present and defend the war to domestic audiences and to establish a direct means of countering both internal and external sources of online dissent.

The Russian Federal State Security Service (FSB) additionally took steps to codify control over the information space and signed a decree on November 4 that approved a list of military and military-technical activities, which if received by foreign sources, can be used against the security of the Russian Federation.[11] The decree essentially codifies types of information relating to Russian military operations that the FSB regards as threats to Russian security that are not technically classified as official state secrets and includes a broad list of provisions relating to informational coverage of the war such as “information on the assessment and forecasts of the development of the military-political, strategic (operational) situation,” and “information about the observance of rule of law and the moral and psychological climate” of Russian troops.[12] This decree represents an extended effort on the part of the FSB to broadly ban a wide range of information on the Russian military, which would ostensibly place tighter controls on discourse among Russian milbloggers and other such sources who frequently discuss and criticize tactical, operational, and strategic dimensions of the war in Ukraine.

Both the proposed Duma bill and the FSB decree indicate that the Russian government is scrambling to take control of the information space as it is increasingly inundated by criticisms of the Russian military that are levied both internally and externally. Russian officials likely seek to consolidate censorship measures to crack down on the prevalence of foreign voices and domestic critiques by applying legislative pressure to fundamental algorithms and presenting a wide range of activities that can be considered detrimental to Russian state security.

**Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian special services are planning false flag attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure in an attempt that would likely fail to pressure the Belarusian military to enter the war in Ukraine.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 20 that Russian special services are planning to conduct several false flag terrorist attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure facilities, particularly on the “Ostrovets” Belarusian nuclear power plant.[13] GUR also reported that Russian special services will blame the attacks on Ukrainian and NATO member states to accelerate the Belarusian military’s involvement in Russia’s war in Ukraine.[14] ISW has previously assessed that Belarus’ entry into the war remains highly unlikely due to the heavy domestic risk that involvement would pose to the survival of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s regime and that Russian and Belarusian highlight their bilateral defense cooperation to perpetuate an ongoing information operation that the Belarusian military will enter the war.[15] Potential false flag attacks remain unlikely to change the domestic factors that ISW continues to assess constrain Lukashenko’s willingness to enter the war on Russia’s behalf.

**A Ukrainian official acknowledged on November 21 that Ukrainian forces are conducting a military operation on the Kinburn Spit, a location which would allow Ukrainian forces to better conduct potential operations on the left (east) bank in Kherson Oblast.** Ukrainian Southern Defense Forces spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk stated on November 21 that Ukrainian forces are conducting a military operation on the Kinburn Spit and called for operational silence to be respected. [16] Humenyuk emphasized that the Kinburn Spit is the last piece of territory that Russian forces occupy in Mykolaiv Oblast.[17] The Kinburn Spit is only 4km across the strait from Ochakiv and allows for control of the entrance to the Dnipro and Southern Bug rivers as well as the Mykolaiv and Kherson city ports. Russian forces used positions on the Kinburn Spit to conduct routine missile and artillery strikes on Ukrainian positions in Ochakiv, southern Mykolaiv Oblast, and other areas along the Ukrainian-controlled Black Sea Coast.[18] The Kinburn Spit is also out of the 25km range of 152mm artillery that Russian forces have accumulated on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast. Control of the Kinburn Spit would allow Ukrainian forces to relieve Russian strikes on the Ukrainian-controlled Black Sea coast, increase naval activity in the area, and conduct potential operations to cross to the left (east) bank in Kherson Oblast under significantly less Russian artillery fire compared to a crossing of the Dnipro River.

**The November 18 video of a Russian soldier opening fire on a group of Ukrainian servicemen while Russian troops were surrendering has served as a catalyst for further division between the Kremlin and prominent voices in the Russian information space.** As ISW reported on November 18, a video widely circulated on social media shows a Russian soldier fire on Ukrainian troops as Ukrainian soldiers were taking prisoners in Makiivka, Luhansk Oblast, resulting in the deaths of the Russian prisoners. Open-source analysts and later a *New York Times* independent investigation confirmed that the Russian serviceman was the first to open fire but did not offer conclusions about how the Russian prisoners died.[19] While Russian officials responded to the video by adamantly accusing Ukraine of war crimes and calling for an investigation into the identities of the Ukrainian soldiers, several Russian milbloggers capitalized on the content of the video to criticize the Russian military and mobilization practices. One milblogger noted that the Makiivka shooting video is a clear

example of how mobilized recruits lack the basic morale and discipline to properly fight for their beliefs and claimed that it is ridiculous that so many Russian soldiers even surrendered to Ukrainian troops in the first place.[20] The divide between milbloggers criticizing the Makiivka shooting is emblematic of Russian military failures, and the Kremlin's using it to further an information operation against the Ukrainian military may further fragment the information space.

#### Key Takeaways

- Two days of shelling caused widespread damage to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- The Russian government is continuing to escalate control over the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian special services are planning false flag attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure in an attempt that would likely fail to pressure the Belarusian military to enter the war in Ukraine. ISW continues to assess that it is unlikely Belarusian forces will enter the war.
- A Ukrainian official acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are conducting a military operation on the Kinburn Spit, Mykolaiv Oblast.
- The November 18 video of a Russian soldier opening fire on a group of Ukrainian servicemen while Russian troops were surrendering has served as a catalyst for further division between the Kremlin and prominent voices in the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern Ukraine amid worsening weather conditions.
- Russian forces continued ground assaults near Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian forces continued conducting defensive measures and establishing fortifications in Kherson Oblast south of the Dnipro River as Ukrainian forces continued striking Russian force accumulations in southern Ukraine.
- Russian mobilized personnel continue to protest and desert as their relatives continue to publicly advocate against mobilization issues.
- Russian occupation authorities intensified filtration measures and the incorporation of occupied territory into Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, November 20. This report discusses the rising influence of the milblogger (military correspondent or *voenkor*) community in Russia despite its increasingly critical commentary on the conduct of the war. The milblogger community reportedly consists of over 500 independent authors and has emerged as an authoritative voice on the Russian war. The community maintains a heavily pro-war and Russian nationalist outlook and is intertwined with prominent Russian nationalist ideologists. Milbloggers' close relationships with armed forces – whether Russian Armed Forces, Chechen special units, Wagner Group mercenaries, or proxy formations – have given this community an authoritative voice arguably louder in the Russian information space than the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Russian President Vladimir Putin has defended the milbloggers from MoD attacks and protected their independence even as he increases oppression and censorship throughout Russia.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on November 20:

- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 20 that Russian special services are planning false flag attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure facilities to pressure the Belarusian military to enter the war in Ukraine.
- The Ukrainian General Staff added that Ukrainian officials have not observed the formation of any Belarusian assault groups. ISW continues to assess that it is unlikely that Belarusian forces will invade Ukraine.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported ongoing fighting along the Svatove-Kreminna line on November 20. Russian sources noted that deteriorating weather conditions are impacting hostilities.
- A Ukrainian military official stated that Ukrainian forces have liberated 12 settlements in Luhansk Oblast since the start of the eastern counteroffensive.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed to strike a Ukrainian troop concentration in the area of Novoselivske, Luhansk Oblast. The Russian MoD previously claimed to repel Ukrainian attacks on the settlement, and this claim might indicate that Ukrainian forces advanced to the settlement.

- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and western Donetsk directions.
  - Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continued to transfer some forces from the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River to other operational directions, but still maintain a significant force presence in southern Kherson Oblast.
  - Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that shelling damaged the infrastructure of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). One Russian milblogger claimed that the shelling came from Russian-controlled territory south of the plant, but most Russian sources accused Ukraine.
  - Russian occupation officials may have purged the occupation Mayor of Enerhodar Alexander Volga. Some Russian sources claimed that Volga received a promotion within the occupation administration.
  - Russian military officials continued mobilization measures amid reports of ongoing resistance and poor conditions.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 19, 6:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces are reportedly beginning to reinforce their positions in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, and eastern Zaporizhzhia oblasts with personnel from Kherson Oblast and mobilized servicemen. The Ukrainian General Staff reported an increase in Russian military personnel in Luhansk City and noted that Russian forces are housing servicemen in abandoned homes in Krasne and Simeikyne about 30km southeast of Luhansk City.<sup>[1]</sup> Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Russian forces are transferring the remnants of the Russian airborne units from right (west) bank Kherson Oblast to Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[2]</sup> Luhansk Oblast Military Administration added that a part of redeploying Russian troops is arriving in Novoaidar, approximately 55km east of Severodonetsk.<sup>[3]</sup> Advisor to Mariupol Mayor Petro Andryushenko also noted the arrival of redeployed personnel and military equipment to Mariupol, stating that Russian forces are placing 10,000 to 15,000 servicemen in the Mariupol Raion.<sup>[4]</sup> Andryushenko stated that newly mobilized men are deploying to the presumably western Donetsk Oblast frontline via Mariupol. Russian forces are reportedly attempting to disperse forces by deploying some elements in the Hulyaipole direction in eastern Zaporizhzhia Oblast.<sup>[5]</sup> Russia will also likely commit additional mobilized forces in the coming weeks, given that mobilized units of the Russian 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Tank Army have finished their training in Brest Oblast, Belarus.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian forces will likely continue to use mobilized and redeployed servicemen to reignite offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast and maintain defensive positions in Luhansk Oblast.

US intelligence officials stated on November 19 that Russian and Iranian officials finalized a deal in early November to manufacture Iranian drones on Russian territory.<sup>[7]</sup> The US officials stated that the deal could allow Russia to "dramatically increase its stockpile" of Iranian drones. The Washington Post reported that Russian forces have launched 400 Iranian kamikaze drones since first using them in the Ukrainian theater in August, and Ukrainian officials have previously stated that Ukrainian forces down 70% of drones before they can strike their targets.<sup>[8]</sup> The US officials stated that it is unclear what assistance Russia will provide to Iran in return for the drones.<sup>[9]</sup> The deepening relationship between Russia and Iran, specifically in the provision of long-range munitions such as kamikaze drones and precision missiles, may allow Russian forces to sustain their campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure for a longer period than their diminishing stockpile of munitions would otherwise allow. This report also suggests that Russia can somehow circumvent Western sanctions to acquire the microchips needed to program the drones it plans on manufacturing. A Russian milblogger claimed that the deal allows Russian officials to claim they build Russian drones—thus providing an

informational win—having previously stated that the domestic manufacturing of Iranian drones on Russian territory humiliates Russia.[10]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are reportedly beginning to reinforce their positions in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts with personnel from Kherson Oblast and mobilized servicemen.
  - US intelligence officials stated that Russian and Iranian officials finalized a deal in early November to manufacture Iranian drones on Russian territory.
  - Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on the Svatove-Kremenna line.
  - Russian forces maintained their offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and west of Donetsk City despite reports of high losses around Bakhmut.
  - Russian forces continued efforts to fortify areas around ground lines of communication in southern Ukraine while struggling with the partial loss of the use of the Kerch Strait Bridge.
  - Russian media sources continued active discussions of an impending second wave of mobilization.
  - The number of Russian prisoners appears to have dropped by about 6.5% since January of 2022 likely due to intensive Wagner Group recruitment.
  - Russian authorities are working to establish control over the information space in occupied territories and identify Ukrainian partisans.
- 

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 18, 8:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian officials are preparing for further covert mobilization efforts even as the fall conscription cycle is underway, likely further flooding the already overburdened Russian force generation apparatus in such a way that will be detrimental to the development of mobilized and conscripted servicemen. Russian Telegram channels actively discussed indicators on November 18 that the Kremlin is preparing for a second mobilization wave and circulated an image of a draft summons received by a citizen of St. Petersburg who was reportedly told to appear for mobilization in January 2023 despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of the formal end of partial mobilization on October 31.[1] Nationalist milblogger additionally circulated claims that general mobilization will begin in December or January.[2] An independent Russian outlet published an investigation on November 18 showing that state structures and enterprises are continuing to prepare their employees for mobilization by sending them to various training programs and mobilization-related educational courses.[3] Another Russian outlet noted that the Odintsovo garrison military court in Moscow Oblast inadvertently confirmed that mobilization is continuing despite its formal end.[4] The court reportedly accused a mobilized soldier of beating his commander on November 13 “during the performance of his duties of military service or in connection with the performance of these duties during the period of mobilization,” which indicates that the court is operating on the legal basis that mobilization is still very much underway.[5] The Kremlin has said that Russian President Vladimir Putin has no need to sign a decree formally ending the mobilization period, as ISW has previously reported. [6]

The continuation of covert mobilization efforts and potential preparations for another mobilization wave in tandem with the current fall conscription cycle are likely adding substantial strain to an already overburdened Russian force generation apparatus. As ISW previously assessed, Putin likely ordered the end of partial mobilization in order to free up bureaucratic and administrative capacity for the November 1 conscription class.[7] However, it is evident that Russian authorities never fully halted mobilization efforts, which means that a limited number of mobilized recruits are still being forced through the training system at the same time as conscripts are going through their own training cycle. This will likely lead to even lower quality training for both mobilized recruits and conscripts as they

compete for insufficient training capacity. Another wave of mobilization in the coming months will only worsen the situation and likely degrade the overall quality of the Russian troops that will be funneled to the frontline in Ukraine.

**The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that it does not recognize the illegal Russian seizure and operation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) or the illegal annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory, a sharp escalation in IAEA rhetoric.** The IAEA's Board of Governors issued a statement on November 17 that called on Russia to "immediately abandon its baseless claims of ownership of the plant" and to withdraw "military and other personnel" from the ZNPP due to "grave concerns" over the ZNPP's integrity.<sup>[8]</sup> The IAEA issued a statement on November 18 that Russian strikes on November 17 partially or completely cut power to Ukraine's Khmelnytsky Nuclear Power Plant and Rivne Nuclear Power Plant, and IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi stated that these strikes demonstrate "the potential nuclear safety and security risks facing all of Ukraine's nuclear facilities during this terrible war, not just the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant."<sup>[9]</sup> ISW recently assessed that the IAEA's rhetorical shift suggests that Russian physical control and operational authority over the ZNPP alarms the IAEA.<sup>[10]</sup> Russian forces' ongoing threats to both the ZNPP and Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) in unoccupied territory indicate that Russia is an unsuitable caretaker of the ZNPP, even though the Russian government relies on claims that it is a responsible operator of the ZNPP to legitimize its ongoing presence at the plant.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Social media footage circulated on November 18 shows a Russian soldier opening fire on Ukrainians as other Russian soldiers were surrendering.** The graphic footage shows Ukrainian troops in Makiivka, Luhansk Oblast, taking a group of Russian soldiers prisoner when one Russian soldier emerges from a house holding a gun and opens fire.<sup>[12]</sup> Drone footage shows the bodies of the deceased Russian soldiers after the incident.<sup>[13]</sup> Open-source analysts concluded that the Russian soldier opened fire initially, but it is unclear who killed the Russian prisoners, when, and under what circumstances.<sup>[14]</sup> However, the Russian information space immediately responded to the footage by widely accusing Ukrainian forces of a "mass execution" of the Russian prisoners.<sup>[15]</sup> The Russian Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against Ukrainian Armed Forces and is reportedly trying to identify the Ukrainian servicemen in the video.<sup>[16]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian officials are preparing for further covert mobilization efforts even as the fall conscription cycle is underway, likely further diminishing the development of quality mobilized and conscripted servicemen.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that it does not recognize the illegal Russian seizure of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) or the illegal annexation of other occupied Ukrainian territory, a sharp escalation in IAEA rhetoric.
- Social media footage circulated on November 18 shows a Russian soldier opening fire on Ukrainians as other Russian soldiers were surrendering.
- Russian forces reinforced rear areas in Luhansk Oblast and attempted to regain lost positions as Ukrainian troops continued counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued limited ground assaults near Bakhmut and Avdiivka and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian occupation officials and military leadership are seemingly increasingly concerned about subsequent Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- Russia continues to face exceedingly low morale and poor discipline among its forces against the backdrop of ongoing domestic backlash to partial mobilization.
- Russian occupation officials and forces continued to intensify filtration measures in Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine and to undermine the Ukrainian national identity.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 17, 7:45pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted another massive wave of missile strikes across Ukraine on November 17.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops launched five airstrikes and 25 cruise missile strikes at civilian infrastructure objects in Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Kharkiv, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv oblasts throughout the day.[1] Ukrainian Air Force Command noted that Ukrainian air defense forces destroyed four cruise missiles, five Shahed-136 drones, and two Kh-59 guided missiles.[2] Russian forces conducted the largest missile attack since the start of the war on November 15, and as ISW has previously assessed, such missile campaigns are consuming Russia's already depleted store of precision munitions.[3]

**Russian forces in eastern Kherson Oblast are likely partially vulnerable to a Ukrainian interdiction campaign such as the one Ukrainian forces successfully exploited to retake western Kherson Oblast.** Several major ground lines of communication (GLOCs) run through eastern Kherson Oblast into other Russian-controlled areas in southern Ukraine: the southern T2202 Nova Kahkovka-Armiansk route, the southeastern P47 Kakovka-Henichesk route, and the M14 highway that runs eastward into Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Mariupol. Geolocated satellite imagery indicates that Russian troops are establishing defensive positions along some of these critical GLOCs, and social media reporting indicates that Ukrainian strikes have already begun targeting Russian concentration areas and military assets on these routes.[4] The limited number of high-quality roads and railways in this area, particularly connecting Crimea to the mainland, creates potential bottlenecks that could be vulnerable to Ukrainian interdiction efforts that would gradually degrade the Russian ability to continue supplying its grouping in eastern Kherson Oblast and other areas of southern Ukraine. ISW previously reported the targeting of similar bottlenecks along key GLOCS—not just the bridges across the Dnipro River—during Ukraine's Kherson counteroffensive in late August to mid-October culminated in the Russian withdrawal from the west bank of Kherson Oblast to positions further south of the Dnipro River. Ukrainian forces will likely find it harder to achieve such dramatic effects in eastern Kherson but may be able to disrupt Russian efforts to solidify and hold their new defensive lines.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree changing the composition of the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC) on November 17.**[5] The decree notably expels four Russian human rights activists, including Ekaterina Vinokurova, who wrote a piece criticizing the rise of "patriotic" Telegram channels and nationalist milbloggers who have cornered the information space against opposition outlets who deviate from the predominant Kremlin line of the war in Ukraine.[6] Russian media previously reported that Vinokurova and other members of the HRC appealed to the Russian Investigative Committee to look into the widely circulated video of the execution of a former Wagner Group fighter who reportedly defected to Ukraine.[7] Putin's new appointees to the HRC include a slate of Russian political and proxy members and notably Sasha Kots, a prominent milblogger and war correspondent who has been heavily involved in covering Russian operations in Ukraine.[8] Kots most recently called for Russia to maintain massive missile strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure on November 17.[9] This decree likely represents the Kremlin's wider effort to stifle domestic civil opposition by continuing to platform prominent voices in the information space that propagate the Kremlin's line on the war in Ukraine.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces conducted another massive wave of missile strikes across Ukraine on November 17**
- **Russian forces in eastern Kherson Oblast are likely partially vulnerable to a Ukrainian interdiction campaign such as the one Ukrainian forces successfully exploited to retake western Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree changing the composition of the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC) on November 17.**
- **Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian troops are conducting counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian troops continued targeting Russian military assets and concentration areas on the east bank of Kherson Oblast and in the rear areas of Zaporizhia Oblast on November 17.**
- **Russian authorities continue to face discontented mobilized personnel and low morale on the front lines.**
- **Russian occupation officials continued to destroy Ukrainian culture in Russian-occupied territories.**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepachuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 16, 6:45pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian sources and proxy officials are flagrantly touting the forced adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families.** Prominent Russian milbloggers began circulating a multi-part documentary series on November 9 featuring several Ukrainian children from Donbas after being adopted into Russian families.<sup>[1]</sup> The documentary series claims that Russian officials have evacuated over 150,000 children from Donbas in 2022 alone.<sup>[2]</sup> It is unclear exactly how Russian sources are calculating this figure, and Ukrainian officials previously estimated this number to be 6,000 to 8,000.<sup>[3]</sup> Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov additionally stated he is working with Russian Federation Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova to bring "difficult teenagers" from various Russian regions and occupied Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts to Chechnya to engage in "preventative work" and "military-patriotic education."<sup>[4]</sup> Lvova-Belova has continually advocated for deportations and adoptions of Ukrainian children and herself adopted a child from Mariupol.<sup>[5]</sup> Forced adoption programs and the deportation of children under the guise of vacation and rehabilitation schemes likely form the backbone of a massive Russian depopulation campaign that may amount to a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and constitute a wider ethnic cleansing effort, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Ukrainian sources continued to clarify the damage caused by the massive November 15 Russian missile strike across Ukraine.** The Ukrainian General Staff stated on November 16 that Russian forces launched over 90 Kh-101 and Kalibr cruise missiles and 11 drones over the course of November 15 and targeted critical infrastructure in a number of oblasts.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that Ukrainian air defense and ground forces shot down 75 missiles and 10 Shahed-136 drones.<sup>[8]</sup> US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin noted on November 16 that the US-provided National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS) had a 100% success rate in intercepting Russian missiles.<sup>[9]</sup> As ISW previously reported, Russian forces likely used a substantial portion of their high-precision weapon systems in the November 15 attack.<sup>[10]</sup>

**The Russian information space largely followed the official Kremlin framing of the missile strike on Polish territory as a Western provocation.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on November 16 that Ukrainian and other foreign officials' statements about Russian missiles in connection with the strike on Polish territory constitute a "deliberate provocation with the aim of escalating the situation."<sup>[11]</sup> Russian Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev accused the West of moving closer to world war by waging a hybrid attack against Russia following the strike on Polish territory.<sup>[12]</sup> Russian milbloggers widely accused Western and Ukrainian officials of trying to falsely blame Russia for the strike in order to justify increased support to Ukraine and further escalation in Eastern Europe.<sup>[13]</sup> Some Russian sources also asserted that Ukrainian and Western officials were trying to use the incident to either pressure Russia to end its coordinated missile campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure or to justify sending "better" air defenses to Ukraine.<sup>[14]</sup> The Russian milbloggers' support of the Kremlin framing of the strike as a Western provocation is to be expected of a Russian information space that widely views the conflict in Ukraine as a Western operation aimed at degrading Russia as a regional and global power.

**Wagner financer Yevgeny Prigozhin is continuing to establish himself as a central figure in the pro-war ultranationalist community, likely in pursuit of ambitious political goals.** Russian opposition media outlet *Meduza* reported on November 16 that two sources close to the Kremlin stated that Prigozhin is thinking about creating a "conservative movement" that may become a political party.<sup>[15]</sup> *Meduza*'s sources reported that Prigozhin has established an information campaign of constant anti-elitist rhetoric modeled after jailed opposition figure Alexei Navalny's social media campaign against Russian corruption, but to a very different effect.<sup>[16]</sup> *Meduza*'s sources reported that Prigozhin intends to simultaneously use the anti-elitist social media campaign to cast himself as a populist figure while currying favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin by intimidating elites that may be viewed as insufficiently loyal to Putin.<sup>[17]</sup> ISW has previously reported that Prigozhin is attempting to appeal to a constituency in Russia that is both interested in Russia's claimed national superiority and Soviet brutalist strength and opposed to Russian elite corruption.<sup>[18]</sup> Prigozhin has previously denied that he is attempting to cast himself as a politician or that he intends to create a political party or movement.<sup>[19]</sup> ISW has previously reported that Prigozhin is also pursuing the creation of parallel military structures to advance his influence in the ultranationalist pro-war

community.[20] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Andriy Chernyak reported on November 15 that Prigozhin initially began constructing parallel military structures to suppress potential uprisings in Russia but capitalized upon the Kremlin's need for more capable forces in Russia's offensive campaign in Ukraine.[21] ISW has previously assessed that Prigozhin's personal army serves his own personal political goals first and the Russian war effort in Ukraine second. [22] Prigozhin will likely continue efforts to establish parallel military structures and form an anti-elite campaign to cement himself as the central figure of an ultranationalist pro-war political movement in Russia.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian sources and proxy officials are flagrantly touting the forced adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families.
- Ukrainian sources continued to clarify the damage caused by the massive November 15 Russian missile strike across Ukraine.
- The Russian information space largely followed the official Kremlin framing of the missile strike on Polish territory as a Western provocation.
- Wagner Group financer Yevgeny Prigozhin is continuing to establish himself as a central figure in the pro-war ultranationalist community likely in pursuit of ambitious political goals.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the directions of Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut and Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian forces and logistics nodes in southern Ukraine.
- Multiple reports indicate that the morale and psychological state of Russian forces in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts are exceedingly low.
- Russian officials continued their efforts to replace proxy officials in occupied territories with Russian officials, forcibly relocate residents, and integrate occupied areas with Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 15, 10:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted the largest set of missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure since the start of the war.** Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yuriy Ignat reported on November 15 that Russian forces launched about 100 Kh-101 and Kh-555 cruise missiles at targets in Ukraine, primarily against Ukrainian critical infrastructure facilities.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces targeted Ukrainian infrastructure with ten drones. [2] Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Russian forces struck targets in Kyiv as well as in Rivne, Zhytomyr, Lviv, Khmelnytskyi, Dnipropetrovsk, Poltava, Vinnytsia, Odesa, Kirovohrad, Cherkasy, Volyn, and Kharkiv oblasts.[3]

**The Russian military likely used a substantial portion of its remaining high-precision weapon systems in the coordinated missile strikes on November 15.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 73 Russian cruise missiles and all drones on November 15. [4] Ukrainian air defenses had previously shot down 43 cruise missiles out of 84 and 13 drones out of 24 during the October 10 coordinated Russian missile strikes.[5] Ukraine's increased shoot-down percentage illustrates the improvement in Ukrainian air defenses in the last month, and the Ukrainian General Staff attributed this improvement to the effectiveness of Western-provided air defense systems. ISW also assesses that Russian forces are greatly depleting their stock of high-precision weapons systems and will likely have to slow the pace of their campaign against critical Ukrainian infrastructure.[6] Russian missile strikes continue to pose a threat to the Ukrainian civilian population with Ukrainian Deputy Head of the Presidential Office Kyrylo Tymoshenko stating that the energy

situation is rather “critical” in Ukraine.[7] **Damage to Ukraine’s energy infrastructure is unlikely to break Ukrainians’ spirit, however, given Ukraine’s improving air defenses and recent ground victories in Kherson Oblast.**

**Polish officials announced that a likely “Russian-made missile” landed in Poland within six kilometers of the international border with Ukraine. Western officials have yet to make definitive statements regarding the incident.** The Polish Foreign Ministry stated on November 15 that a “Russian-made missile” killed two Polish citizens in the border village of Przewodow.[8] Polish President Andrzej Duda noted that Poland does not currently have information regarding the actor responsible for firing the missile but noted that the missile was “most probably Russian-made.”[9] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied Russia’s involvement in striking any targets near the Ukraine-Polish border and claimed that the incident is a “provocation.”[10] Russian forces, however, did target energy infrastructure in Lviv City, about 72km south of Przewodow.[11] US President Joe Biden stated that according to preliminary information it is unlikely that the missile was fired from territorial Russia but emphasized that the investigation is still ongoing as of the time of this publication. [12] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Russia of staging a “serious provocation” on NATO territory.[13] ISW will continue to monitor the situation.

**The Kremlin had prepared today’s massive missile campaign before Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy presented his 10-point peace proposal at the G20 summit on November 15.** Zelensky reiterated that Ukraine will negotiate with Russia if the Kremlin totally withdraws its forces from Ukraine, restores Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and ensures punishment for war crimes among other provisions on nuclear, energy, and food security.[14] The Kremlin likely deliberately planned a massive missile strike campaign on Ukraine in anticipation of Zelensky’s speech at the G20 summit given that a multi-direction missile campaign requires significant military preparation. The Russian pro-war community on Telegram claimed that the Kremlin retaliated for Zelensky’s “Russophobic” statements shortly after his speech, but the impossibility of launching such a massive attack on short notice highlights the Kremlin’s disinterest in setting the stage for negotiations with Ukraine.[15]

**The Kremlin’s official narrative surrounding the G20 summit further confirms Russia’s disinterest in the prospect of peace negotiations with Ukraine.** Russian President Vladimir Putin did not appear at the summit and instead signed numerous decrees granting honorary titles to Russian-occupied Ukrainian cities.[16] Putin’s Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov and Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia will continue its “special military operation” in Ukraine, accusing Zelensky of unwillingness to negotiate with Russia.[17] Lavrov called Ukraine’s conditions “unrealistic and inadequate,” which has been the Kremlin’s recurrent position throughout the war. [18] Peskov also made a point to emphasize that Russia will still treat liberated Kherson City as the capital of Russian-occupied Kherson Oblast, and Secretary of Russia’s Security Council Nikolai Patrushev repeated the original false narratives used to justify the invasion that Russia needs to defend Donbas and that Ukrainian “Nazis” failed to comply with the Minsk agreements.[19]

**Russian military commanders reportedly ignored existing plans for offensive operations in the Vuhledar direction and committed poorly trained reinforcements to costly assaults on Pavlivka out of impatience.** Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) military commander Aleksandr Khodakovsky claimed on November 15 that Russian forces initially planned to attack in the Vuhledar area from two directions but that he and other commanders realized that the poor training of reinforcements and their inability to contact brigade commanders made such plans impossible.[20] Khodakovsky claimed that brigade commanders changed the plan completely and committed all Russian forces in the area to an attack on Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast.[21] ISW had previously reported that Russian forces prematurely impaled an insufficient concentration of mobilized personnel on offensive pushes aimed at seizing Pavlivka leading to extensive losses, particularly among the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet.[22] Russian military officials likely abandoned their initial plans and committed poorly trained reinforcements to the assault on Pavlivka due to a sense of politically-driven urgency to restart the Donetsk offensive campaign before the planned Russian withdrawal from Kherson City.

**The high costs associated with the Russian offensive push on Pavlivka continue to generate criticism of Russian military leadership.** Khodakovsky claimed that Russian military leadership is trying to blame the “miserable results” on the commander of the 40th Separate Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet for not properly supporting the Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade. [23] Khodakovsky argued that the brigade commanders are guilty of the high costs of the assault and that the commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin, should not allow an “innocent” commander to take the blame for the poor planning of Russian military leadership. [24] ISW previously assessed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) issued a rare statement on November 7 in response to the extensive Russian milblogger outcry concerning the losses associated with the Pavlivka offensive operation.[25] Khodakovsky’s criticisms of the Russian military command

indicate that the Russian MoD likely failed to address the outrage fully and that Russian pro-war figures and milbloggers will continue to criticize Russian military commanders.

**Russians are increasingly turning to various platforms on social media to express their dissatisfaction with mobilization problems, a phenomenon that has the ingredients to ignite organized online-based movements in Russia.** Sixteen anti-war groups in Russia launched a petition demanding that Russian President Vladimir Putin demobilize all mobilized Russian men. [26] The petition has already garnered almost 38,000 signatories as of the time of this publication. About 1,500 mothers of disabled children and mothers with more than three children in their households also petitioned Putin to exempt their husbands from mobilization.[27] Russian opposition and non-governmental organizations such as Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg had voiced concerns with the Russian Armed Forces prior to the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine but did not receive significant attention within the Russian information space.[28] Grievances over mobilization issues, however, reached the milblogger community that was already critical of the Russian Ministry of Defense and that has been discussing issues with the execution of mobilization since the second day of the order.[29] These grievances are increasingly influencing both the opposition and the pro-war communities, which is a new phenomenon. While Russian police have consistently suppressed small-scale protests throughout the country the Kremlin has yet to regulate platforms such as Telegram that allow Russians across the country to share their discontent and demand action from local officials with the backing of prominent milbloggers.

**Russian officials continued to set conditions to force the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to recognize Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and thereby de facto recognize the Russian annexation of occupied Ukraine.** The IAEA announced on November 14 that Russian ZNPP authorities rejected a Ukrainian proposal to bring two reactors to a low power state from a hot shutdown state and that Russian officials are increasingly making "significant operational decisions," noting that IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi expressed concern at "open contradictions" in decision making at the ZNPP.[30] The IAEA and Ukraine's Resistance Center reported that Russia is increasingly importing technical staff from Russian nuclear power plants to the ZNPP.[31] The IAEA's reporting and concerns about the decision-making hierarchy at the ZNPP is an inflection in the IAEA's usual communications and suggests that Russian physical control and operational authority over the plant is increasing to a point that is alarming the IAEA.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces conducted the largest set of missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure since the start of the war, likely using a substantial portion of their remaining high-precision weapon systems.**
- **Polish officials announced that a likely "Russian-made missile" landed in Poland within six kilometers of the international border with Ukraine.**
- **Russian military commanders reportedly ignored existing plans for offensive operations in the Vuhledar direction and committed poorly trained reinforcements to costly assaults on Pavlivka out of impatience, generating continued criticism of Russian military leadership.**
- **Russian officials continued to set conditions to force the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to recognize Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and thereby de facto recognize the Russian annexation of occupied Ukraine.**
- **Russians are increasingly turning to various platforms on social media to express their dissatisfaction with mobilization problems, which could ignite organized online anti-war movements in Russia.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensives in the direction of Svatove and Kreminna, and Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian logistics to the rear of Luhansk Oblast.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.**
- **Premature reports of Ukrainian forces capturing territory on the left bank of the Dnipro River provoked backlash in the Russian information space.**
- **Russian logistics routes from Crimea into southern Ukraine are likely highly degraded.**
- **Russian forces are continuing to supply their diminishing supplies with Belarusian military equipment.**
- **Russian officials continued to minimize the role of proxy officials in occupied territories in favor of Russian officials.**

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 14, 8:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) escalated claims of Russian territorial gains in Donetsk Oblast on November 13 and 14, likely to emphasize that Russian forces are intensifying operations in Donetsk Oblast following withdrawal from the right bank of Kherson Oblast. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces completed the capture of Mayorsk (20km south of Bakhmut) on November 13 and of Pavlivka (45km southwest of Donetsk City) on November 14 after several weeks of not making claims of Russian territorial gains.<sup>[1]</sup> As ISW assessed on November 13, Russian forces will likely recommit troops to Donetsk Oblast after leaving the right bank of Kherson Oblast, which will likely lead to an intensification of operations around Bakhmut, Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces will likely make gains in these areas in the coming days and weeks, but these gains are unlikely to be operationally significant. The Russian MoD is likely making more concrete territorial claims in order to set information conditions to frame Russian successes in Donetsk Oblast and detract from discontent regarding losses in Kherson Oblast.

Russian milbloggers seized on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's November 14 visit to Kherson City to criticize Russian military capacity more substantively than in previous days during the Russian withdrawal from the right bank of Kherson Oblast. Russian milbloggers

largely complained that Zelensky arrived in Kherson City and was able to move around with relatively little concern about Russian strikes in his vicinity and questioned why Russian forces did not launch strikes on Zelensky.<sup>[3]</sup> One prominent milblogger noted that this shows that Russia does not want to win the war and criticized Russian forces for allowing Zelensky to step foot on "Russian territory."<sup>[4]</sup> Russian milbloggers have notably maintained a relatively muted response to the Russian loss of the right bank in the past days, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[5]</sup> The clear shift in rhetoric from relatively exculpatory language generally backing the withdrawal as a militarily sound decision to ire directed at Russian military failures suggests that Russian military leadership will likely be pressured to secure more direct gains in Donetsk Oblast and other areas.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to establish himself as a highly independent, Stalinist warlord in Russia, becoming a prominent figure within the nationalist pro-war community.** Prigozhin commented on a Russian execution video of a reportedly exchanged Wagner prisoner of war, Yevgeniy Nuzhin, sarcastically supporting Nuzhin's execution and denouncing him as a traitor to the Russian people.<sup>[6]</sup> Most sources noted that Wagner executed Nuzhin following a prisoner exchange on November 10, but a few claimed that Wagner kidnapped the serviceman via Prigozhin's connections to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Russian General Staff.<sup>[7]</sup> Prigozhin claimed that Nuzhin planned his escape to free Ukraine and used the opportunity to compare Nuzhin to Russian elites who disregard the interests of the Russian people and fly away from Russia's problems in their personal business jets.<sup>[8]</sup> The Russian nationalist community overwhelmingly welcomed the public punishment of the supposed deserter, noting that the Wagner command is undertaking appropriate military measures to discipline its forces.<sup>[9]</sup> Some milbloggers even compared the execution to Joseph Stalin's "heroic" execution of Russian Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky who had also fled Bolshevik Russia, further confirming Prigozhin's appeal among the proponents of Stalin's repressive legacy.<sup>[10]</sup> **Prigozhin is taking actions that will resonate with a constituency interested in the ideology of Russia's national superiority, Soviet brutalist strength, and distasteful of the Kremlin's corruption, which Russian President Vladimir Putin has used as a political force throughout his reign.**

**Prigozhin is steadily using his participation in the Russian invasion of Ukraine to consolidate his influence in Russia.** One milblogger voiced a concern that the integration of Wagner mercenaries into Russian society is "the destruction of even the illusion of legality and respect for rights in Putin's Russian Federation."<sup>[11]</sup> The milblogger added that Prigozhin is seizing the initiative to expand Wagner's power in St. Petersburg while Russian security forces are "asleep." Such opinions are not widespread among Russian nationalists but highlight some concerns with Prigozhin's rapid expansion amid the Russian "special military operation" and its implications on the Putin regime. Prigozhin, for example, has requested that the FSB General Prosecutor's office investigate St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov for high treason after St. Petersburg officials denied a construction permit for his Wagner Center in the city.<sup>[12]</sup> He had also publicly scoffed at the Russian bureaucracy when asked if his forces will train at Russian training grounds, likely to further assert the independence of his forces.<sup>[13]</sup> Prigozhin's unhinged antics in the political sphere are unprecedented in Putin's regime.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) escalated claims of Russian territorial gains in Donetsk Oblast on November 13 and 14, likely to emphasize that Russian forces are intensifying operations in Donetsk Oblast following their withdrawal from the right bank of Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian milbloggers seized on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's November 14 visit to Kherson City to criticize Russian military capacity more substantively than in previous days during the Russian withdrawal from the right bank of Kherson Oblast.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to establish himself as a highly independent, Stalinist warlord in Russia, becoming an even more prominent figure within the nationalist pro-war community.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on the Svatove-Kremenna line and clashed with Russian troops near Bilohorivka.**
- **Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to regain positions in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.**
- **Russian forces intensified offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast and claimed to have gained territory around Bakhmut and southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops launched an unsuccessful raid onto the Kinburn Spit.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin signed additional decrees refining mobilization protocols and expanding military recruitment provisions, likely in an ongoing effort to reinforce Russian war efforts.**

- Russian occupation officials continued to drive the “evacuation” and forced relocation of residents in occupied territories and took efforts to move occupation elements farther from the Dnipro River.



### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan

November 13, 3:30 ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, November 13. This report discusses the likely evolution of the war following Ukraine's operational success in regaining control of western Kherson Oblast. The Russians are not setting conditions for a relaxation of hostilities for the rest of the fall and into the winter but rather are launching a new offensive in Donetsk Oblast. The Ukrainians will likely use combat power recouped from the liberation of western Kherson to reinforce their ongoing counter-offensive in Luhansk Oblast or to open a new counter-offensive drive elsewhere. This is not the time to slow down aid or press for ceasefires or negotiations, but rather the time to help Ukraine take advantage of its momentum in conditions that favor Kyiv rather than Moscow.

Ukraine has won an important victory in the campaign that liberated western Kherson Oblast, culminating in the withdrawal of Russian forces completed on November 11.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin had been determined to hold this key terrain, possession of which would have

allowed him to renew his invasion of unoccupied Ukraine from positions on the west bank of the Dnipro River. That consideration was likely more important in Putin's calculations than the symbolic value of retaining the only oblast capital his forces had seized since February 24, 2022. (Russia had already taken Luhansk City and Donetsk City in its 2014-2015 invasion.) Putin had committed substantial Russian forces to the defense of western Kherson, including many of the remaining elite airborne units available to the Russian military.<sup>[2]</sup> He also committed reinforcements generated by the partial mobilization of reservists he had ordered on September 21.<sup>[3]</sup> Those forces had dug in and fought hard to hold their ground, taking many losses. Ukraine's success despite this Russian determination and allocation of scarce elite units is in many respects even more impressive than its victory in Kharkiv Oblast in mid-September.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Ukraine's success resulted in large part from the Ukrainian Armed Forces' (UAF's) innovative use of the US-provided HIMARS precision rocket system to disrupt Russian supply lines.** The HIMARS munitions the US has given Ukraine are not suitable for destroying bridges—their warheads are too small and are not optimized for such strikes. The UAF developed a tactic to work around that limitation by conducting multiple precision strikes across the key Antonivskiy Bridge and the road that ran atop the Kakhovka Dam in such a way as to break the roadways in a line across them, rendering them unusable without actually destroying the bridges' infrastructure (or badly damaging the dam).<sup>[5]</sup> The UAF continued to strike the bridges as the Russians sought to repair them, targeting the repair equipment as well as the roadways until the Russians finally gave up. The Russians attempted to construct a pontoon bridge under the Antonivskiy Bridge as a mitigation, but the UAF attacked that effort as well, causing the Russians to abandon it.<sup>[6]</sup> The Russians were left at the end with barges ferrying supplies, equipment, and reinforcements from the east to the west bank.<sup>[7]</sup> The UAF attacked the barges and landing areas as well, but the ferry system was in any case insufficient to supply the 20,000-some Russian mechanized troops trying to hold their lodgment on the western bank of the river.<sup>[8]</sup>

It was clear that the Russians would be unable to defend that lodgment by the time Russian Army General Sergey Surovikin took command of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on October 8.<sup>[9]</sup> Surovikin signaled his intention to withdraw from western Kherson almost immediately and likely began setting conditions to retreat within a couple of weeks.<sup>[10]</sup> It is not clear whether Putin authorized Surovikin to abandon western Kherson fully at that time or whether Surovikin had to continue working to persuade Putin of the hopelessness of any effort to hold on in western Kherson. However that may be, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu met with Surovikin on November 9 in a staged, public setting and ordered him to withdraw, which Surovikin promptly did.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Putin likely elevated Surovikin and let him withdraw from western Kherson on condition that he take the rest of Donetsk Oblast using Russian forces recouped from western Kherson as well as newly-arriving mobilized servicemen.**<sup>[12]</sup> This observation offered by Andriy Zagorodnyuk, chairman of the Ukrainian Center of Defense Strategies, is the likeliest explanation for the resumption in the intensity of Russian offensive operations first around Bakhmut and then to the southwest around the Vuhledar area that began on October 28.<sup>[13]</sup> These offensive efforts otherwise make little operational sense. They are far from operationally significant locations apart from Bakhmut and were launched during a difficult muddy time by inadequately prepared mobilized servicemen before Russian commanders in the area had amassed enough combat power for decisive operations.<sup>[14]</sup> Surovikin likely ordered them to start when they did as an earnest sign of his commitment to Putin.

**Russian offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast will intensify in the coming weeks as additional mobilized servicemen arrive along with forces withdrawn from western Kherson.** Ukrainian forces in the area will find themselves hard-pressed, and Kyiv will very likely have to divert troops to defend against these renewed Russian offensives. The Russians are not likely to make operationally significant gains despite their renewed efforts, although they could conceivably take Bakhmut over time at enormous cost. Russian mobilized servicemen have shown themselves to be inadequately trained, poorly equipped, and very reluctant to fight.<sup>[15]</sup> They are not arriving in cohesive units but rather are being sent largely as individual or small unit replacements to units that have been fighting without rest for nine months, have suffered devastating losses in men and equipment, and are largely demoralized themselves.

Russian forces operating in Donetsk Oblast include conventional units of the regular Russian Armed Forces, mobilized servicemen, Wagner Private Military Company troops, BARS (Russian volunteer reserve) formations, militia units from the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, soldiers from Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen units, and volunteer battalions.<sup>[16]</sup> This bizarre congeries of combat forces will have considerably less effective combat power than would a grouping of regular units of similar size. It is extremely unlikely that Surovikin will be able to forge it into a force able to conduct large-scale offensive mechanized maneuver warfare, particularly since he is not even taking (or being allowed to take) the time to build a coherent strike force before hurling it into the attack. This weird mix

of forces will likely make some gains through sheer weight of numbers, but Ukrainian defenders, likely reinforced, will most probably force it to a halt over the next few months not far from its starting points.

**Ukraine will also likely recoup combat power from western Kherson and redeploy it to other areas for both defensive and counter-offensive operations.** The UAF could conceivably try to chase the Russians across the Dnipro River at various points but is unlikely to do so because the logistics of supporting a Ukrainian lodgment on the eastern bank are very daunting. The UAF is therefore more likely to consolidate its control of the western bank, leave enough force to deter any Russian attempt to cross the river again, and reallocate forces to other areas. The Russian offensive in Donetsk Oblast will likely require the UAF to divert some forces to defend in that area, but the UAF will likely send at least part of the recouped combat power either to reinforce its ongoing counter-offensive in Luhansk Oblast or to open another counter-offensive somewhere else (we will not speculate about where that might be).

**Ukrainian forces have continued to make limited gains in Luhansk Oblast and will likely be able to make more gains if they are reinforced by troops from western Kherson.** The Russians are also reinforcing their defensive positions in Luhansk Oblast, to be sure, but the UAF has been grinding forward nevertheless, and there is no reason to forecast that the ill-trained, ill-equipped, and low-morale Russian reservists will be able to stop Ukrainian troops, buoyed by their victories, from advancing.

**A cessation or prolonged slowing of combat operations over the next few months is therefore very unlikely.** The Russians are emphatically not attempting to establish and strengthen defensive positions all along the line but are rather renewing offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[17]</sup> The Ukrainians will almost certainly continue their counter-offensive operations already underway. Both sides are already fighting in very muddy conditions. They will not likely stop fighting when winter freezes the ground and makes it even more conducive to large-scale mechanized maneuver warfare. **Combat is more likely to intensify than to slacken as temperatures drop.**

**Any attempt at a ceasefire or cessation of hostilities at this time would overwhelmingly favor Russia.** Putin should desire such a ceasefire in his own interest. He should recognize that he needs to give his forces time to recover and allow the reservists flowing into the theater time to integrate into their units, train up, and prepare for serious combat. He should want to stop the Ukrainians from capitalizing on the emotional lift of their recent victories. The fact that Putin continues to whip his generals to offensives in these circumstances is thus a grave error from a military perspective. It likely results from whatever psychological factors led Putin to order the invasion in the first place but also increasingly from Putin's need to show his toughness to the hardline faction led, at least in public, by Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Putin is unlikely to be willing to seek a ceasefire, therefore, unless it is accompanied by tremendous Ukrainian or international concessions.

**Napoleon famously quipped: Never interrupt your enemy whilst he is in the midst of making a mistake. That aphorism has never been truer—Ukraine and its backers should take advantage of Putin's error by continuing to press the counter-offensive in circumstances far more favorable to Kyiv than to Moscow.**

**Ukraine has by no means liberated the minimum territory essential to its future security and economic survival even with the victory in western Kherson, finally.** The city of Melitopol and surrounding areas, the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, land on the east bank of the lower Dnipro River, and territory in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are all vital terrain for Ukraine, as ISW has previously argued.<sup>[18]</sup> Discussions about the future of Crimea and other Ukrainian lands illegally occupied by Russia after 2014 are premature. Ukraine must liberate tens of thousands of square kilometers short of those areas if it is to be able to defend itself against future Russian attacks and reestablish a functional economy.

**Ukrainians and the West must bend every effort to enabling the liberation of those lands as rapidly as possible before worrying about what lies beyond them. Momentum is an important factor in war. Ukraine has it now. Kyiv and its partners must make the most of it.**

# Total Liberated Ukrainian Territory as of November 12, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Key inflections in ongoing military operations on November 13:

- Wagner Group Financer Yevgeny Prigozhin asked the Russian Prosecutor General's Office to open a case against St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov for high treason amid viral footage of Wagner forces murdering one of their own.<sup>[19]</sup> Prigozhin and Russian nationalist milbloggers largely supported the murder of the alleged traitor.<sup>[20]</sup>
- The Russian military grouping stationed in Belarus continues to generate social tensions among Belarusians.<sup>[21]</sup>
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.<sup>[22]</sup>
- Ukrainian forces continued to consolidate control over the right bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[23]</sup> Ukrainian forces struck a Russian military base in Chaplynka, Kherson Oblast, 50km south of Beryslav on the eastern bank of the Dnipro.<sup>[24]</sup>
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in the directions of Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.<sup>[25]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces captured Mayorsk, southeast of Bakhmut.<sup>[26]</sup>
- Russian forces continued routine indirect fire against frontline settlements in Zaporizhia and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.<sup>[27]</sup> Russian forces struck Zaporizhzhia City with an Iskander missile.<sup>[28]</sup>
- Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the demobilization of mobilized students in Russian-occupied Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, likely as part of an ongoing effort to integrate proxy forces into the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>[29]</sup>
- Russian forces and occupation officials are forcibly mobilizing men in Russian-occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, and forcing them to construct trenches and defensive fortifications in the city.<sup>[30]</sup>
- Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces are withdrawing from the left bank of the Dnipro River and concentrating forces and equipment in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, and Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[31]</sup>

- Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed an amendment to a draft law that would allow Russian officials to revoke Russian citizenship for disseminating “false” information about the Russian military, participating in extremist or undesirable organizations, or calling for violations of Russian “territorial integrity.”[32]



### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 12, 7:30 ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russia's withdrawal from Kherson City is igniting an ideological fracture between pro-war figures and Russian President Vladimir Putin, eroding confidence in Putin's commitment and ability to deliver his war promises. A pro-war Russian ideologist, Alexander Dugin, openly criticized Putin—whom he referred to as the autocrat—for failing to uphold Russian ideology by surrendering Kherson City on November 12.[1] Dugin said this Russian ideology defines Russia's responsibility to defend "Russian cities" such as Kherson, Belgorod, Kursk, Donetsk, and Simferopol. Dugin noted that an autocrat has a responsibility to save his nation all by himself or face the fate of "king of the rains," a reference to Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in which a king was killed because he was unable to deliver rain amidst a drought. Dugin also downplayed the role of Putin's advisors in failing to protect the Russian world and noted that the commander of Russian Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin was not responsible for the political decision to withdraw from Kherson City. Dugin noted that the autocrat cannot repair this deviation from ideology merely with public appearances, noting that "the

authorities in Russia cannot surrender anything else" and that "the limit has been reached." He also accused the presidential administration of upholding a "fake" ideology because of its fear of committing to the "Russian Idea." Dugin also made a reference to the use of tactical nuclear weapons, which he vaguely stated was "the end" and proceeded to note that overdue Russian changes to the military campaign have not generated any effect to change the course of the war. He also suggested, however, that Russia must commit to the Russian Idea rather than pursuing the "stupid" use of nuclear weapons.

**Putin is having a harder time appeasing parts of the highly ideological pro-war constituency due to his military's inability to deliver his maximalist goals of overthrowing the Ukrainian government and seizing all of Ukraine, as ISW has previously assessed.[2]** Putin's nationalist-leaning propagandists such as Vladimir Solovyov are increasingly demanding that the Kremlin and higher military command to fully commit to their goals in Ukraine, and Solovyov even called for full mobilization and the firing of incompetent officials following the Russian surrender of Kherson City. [3] Select milbloggers have previously criticized Putin for his failure to respond to the attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge on October 9, while others noted that Putin has failed to uphold the ideology of Russian superiority since 2014.[4] Direct criticism of Putin within the pro-war community is almost unprecedented, and Dugin's high-profile and unhinged attack on Putin may indicate a shift among the Russian nationalist ideologues.[5] Putin needs to retain the support of this community and has likely ordered some of his propagandists to suppress any critiques of the Russian withdrawal from Kherson City, since many state TV news programs have been omitting or downplaying the aftermath of withdrawal.[6] **The ever-increasing doubts among extreme Russian nationalists about Putin's commitment to Russian ideology reduce Putin's appeal to the nationalist community, while mobilization and high casualties will likely continue to upset members of the Russian society.**

**Wagner-affiliated channels are also turning on the Kremlin following the loss of Kherson Oblast, which may further elevate the influence of the *siloviki* faction.** Some milbloggers implied that the Kremlin has betrayed Kherson City by "selling out," while others noted that the Kremlin has consistently surrendered its territories without asking the Russian people.[7] Other milbloggers further questioned the legitimacy of the claimed 87% support rate for Russian annexation of Kherson Oblast. [8] Wagner Group financier Yevheny Prigozhin and some milbloggers have previously discussed the possibility of "Russia's civil society" stepping up to defend Russia.[9] The growing criticism of the decision to withdraw from western Kherson contrasts with the general support for the decision among the milblogger community before today.

**Russian officials are increasingly normalizing the public and likely illegal deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia.** Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova publicized the illegal kidnapping of 52 medically fragile Ukrainian children from Kherson Oblast to an unspecified "safe" area in Russia on November 12, likely under a medical relocation scheme that Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Ambassador to Russia Rodion Miroshnik confirmed had started on November 5.[10] High level Kremlin officials, including Lvova-Belova and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnulin have publicly acknowledged and praised the relocation of thousands of Ukrainian children to live with Russian families or in Russian facilities in recent weeks.[11] Russian Zaporizhia Oblast occupation officials have made public statements in recent weeks about the planned forced relocation of over 40,000 Kherson Oblast children to Russia and acknowledged on November 12 that their systems for caring for Ukrainian children are inadequate.[12] Russian and Ukrainian sources have previously reported that Russian and occupation officials have deported Ukrainian children to Russia under education, vacation, and other schemes within the past 10 days.[13] Such frequent and public acknowledgements are a stark contrast to the first Russian official confirmation of such actions on August 23, when Krasnodar Krai authorities deleted an announcement about the arrival of 300 adoptable Ukrainian children from Mariupol and denied ever issuing the statement.[14] **As ISW has noted and will continue to observe, the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia represents a possible violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[15]**

**Russian military leadership is trying and largely failing to integrate combat forces drawn from many different organizations and of many different types and levels of skill and equipment into a more cohesive fighting force in Ukraine.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian officials stopped the distribution of Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) documents, including documents regarding the participation of DNR and LNR forces in combat, on November 11.[16] Russian authorities also ordered Southern Military District commanders to centralize payments to DNR and LNR fighters through Russian financial institutions and offered DNR and LNR soldiers the option to continue their service as contract servicemembers under Russian law. [17] These efforts will likely increase friction between Russian officials and LNR and DNR officials due to the exclusion of DNR and LNR officials from the process. DNR and LNR servicemembers reportedly feel pressured to accept Russian contracts and have expressed fears that refusal of the new Russian

contracts would lead to the annulment of their documents and termination of DNR/LNR benefits. [18] ISW has previously reported bureaucratic conflict between DNR, LNR, and Russian authorities over administrative structures in occupied areas.[19]

**The lack of structure inherent in the combination of DNR forces, LNR forces, Russian contract servicemembers, Russian regional volunteer servicemembers, Russian mobilized servicemembers, and Wagner Group Private Military Company (PMC) forces creates an environment that fosters intra-force conflict.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on November 12 that tense relations between mobilized soldiers and Chechen volunteer soldiers triggered a brawl in Makiivka that injured three.[20]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russia's withdrawal from Kherson City is igniting an ideological fracture between pro-war figures and Russian President Vladimir Putin, eroding confidence in Putin's commitment to and ability to deliver on his war promises.
- Russian officials are increasingly normalizing the public and likely illegal deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia.
- The Russian military leadership is trying and failing to integrate ad hoc military formations into a more cohesive fighting force in Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.
- Ukrainian forces continued to liberate settlements on the right (western) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the direction of Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.
- Russian officials may be trying to avoid providing military personnel with promised payments.
- Russian forces and occupation officials continue to endanger residents and subject them to coercive measures.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 11

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 11, 6pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces are completing the liberation of the western (right) bank of Kherson Oblast after the Russians retreated from it.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces completed the withdrawal to the eastern (left) bank of the Dnipro River at 5am local time on November 11.[1] While contingents of Russian soldiers likely remain on the west bank, they are likely scattered throughout the Oblast and attempting to retreat as Ukrainian forces push towards the Dnipro River, although some may have remained behind to attempt to conduct partisan activities in small groups. It is unclear how many Russian soldiers remain on the west bank at this time. Russian sources noted that the withdrawal lasted three days and claimed that 20,000 Russian personnel and 3,500 units of military equipment moved across the Dnipro River.[2]

Satellite imagery corroborates statements made by both Ukrainian and Russian sources that Russian troops destroyed the Antonivsky Bridge and Railway Bridge (near Kherson City) and the Nova Kakhovka dam bridge (east of Kherson City near Nova Kakhovka) over the Dnipro River and the Darivka Bridge (northeast of Kherson City) over the Inhulets River in a final attempt to block Ukrainian advances towards central Kherson Oblast (see images in-line with text).[3] Geolocated satellite imagery also indicates that Russian troops have prepared first and second lines of defense south of the Dnipro River and will likely continue efforts to consolidate positions on the left bank in the coming days.[4]



Overview of the damage to the Antonivsky Bridge on November 11. Source: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies



Overview of damage to the Antonivsky Railway Bridge on November 11. Source: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies



Overview of damage to the Darivka Bridge on November 11. Source: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies



Closer view of damage to the damaged section of the Nova Kakhovka dam on November 11. Source: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies

**Ukrainian troops made major territorial gains throughout Kherson Oblast on November 11 and will continue consolidating control of the western bank in the coming days.** Geolocated footage and imagery shows that Ukrainian forces have advanced into Kherson City likely along the T1501 highway from the west and M14 from the north and have taken control of Kherson City and several surrounding settlements along these roads.<sup>[5]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) notably confirmed that Ukrainian troops advanced into Kherson City, and geolocated social media footage shows civilians greeting Ukrainian troops in the center of Kherson City.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukrainian troops also notably took control of Kyselivka and Chornobaivka, two critical settlements along the M14 northwest of Kherson City.<sup>[7]</sup> Geolocated social media additionally shows that Ukrainian troops have advanced south along T1505 highway from positions in Snihurivka (northeast of the Kherson-Mykolaiv Oblast border) and liberated several settlements on this line, including Lymanets and Inhulets.<sup>[8]</sup> Ukrainian forces entered Beryslav (60km east of Kherson City), and social media footage provides evidence of Ukrainian troops in settlements along the P47 highway that runs westward from the Beryslav area towards Kherson City.<sup>[9]</sup> Footage posted to Telegram notably shows Ukrainian troops in Tiahynka, a settlement between Kherson City and Beryslav, directly on the western shore of the Dnipro River.<sup>[10]</sup> Ukrainian forces will continue to drive down major roads towards the Dnipro River and liberate additional settlements in the coming days.

**ISW has recoded all western Kherson Oblast as liberated based on our high confidence assessment that the Russians have deprived themselves of the ability to hold terrain on the right bank of the Dnipro. Ukrainian forces will complete the liberation of any areas not yet under their control rapidly.**

**Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian MoD's statements about the Russian withdrawal to the left bank but generally took a more muted attitude to Ukrainian gains on November 11.** The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces did not leave a single piece of equipment behind during the withdrawal period, which certain milbloggers directly refuted as blatantly untrue.<sup>[11]</sup> Many milbloggers, however, presented a relatively matter-of-fact overview of the situation in Kherson Oblast, largely confirmed Ukrainian gains, and emphasized that the retreat itself was a militarily-sound and necessary choice.<sup>[12]</sup> As ISW previously reported, Russian military leadership, namely Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin, have been developing informational cover to set conditions for the loss of the right bank.<sup>[13]</sup> The generally muted milblogger response to such a massive Russian defeat is consistent with ISW's previous observations of informational mitigations carried out by Surovikin and suggests that milbloggers will continue to focus their discontent on the Russian MoD establishment while backing Surovikin — at least for now.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian forces are completing the liberation of the western (right) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian troops have made major territorial gains throughout Kherson Oblast on November 11 and will continue consolidating control of the western bank in the coming days.**
- **Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian MoD's statements about the Russian withdrawal to the left bank but generally took a more muted attitude to Ukrainian gains.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations towards Kreminna and Svatove, Luhansk Oblast, and Ukrainian forces targeted Russian**

logistics in rear Luhansk Oblast.

- Russian forces continued ground assaults around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.
- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian force concentrations in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Wagner Group financer Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to form parallel military structures in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts, even though there is no threat of a Ukrainian ground invasion into Russian territory.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) subpar conduct of partial mobilization continues to generate social tension.
- Ukrainian partisans continued to target Russian occupation authorities.



### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 10

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Katherine Lawlor, and Mason Clark

November 10, 8pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces steadily advanced in Kherson Oblast on November 10 as Russian forces conduct a withdrawal to the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River. Ukrainian military officials and geolocated social media footage confirm that Ukrainian troops have made gains northwest, west, and northeast of Kherson City in the past 24 hours and advanced up to 7km in some areas.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces so far appear to be withdrawing in relatively good order, and Ukrainian forces are making expected gains without routing Russian forces, as they did in the Kharkiv counteroffensive. Ukrainian

strikes since August have successfully degraded Russian supply lines on the west (right) bank to force Russian forces to withdraw and will liberate Kherson Oblast to the Dnipro River in the coming days or weeks. The Russian withdrawal will take some time to complete, and fighting will continue throughout Kherson Oblast as Ukrainian troops advance and come up against pre-prepared Russian defensive lines, especially around Kherson City.

**ISW does not assess the fighting in Ukraine will halt or enter a stalemate due to winter weather, despite faulty Western assumptions.** NBC News reported on November 9 that some US and Western defense officials are eyeing an “expected winter slowdown in fighting as an opportunity for diplomacy to begin between Russia and Ukraine.”<sup>[2]</sup> Autumn and springtime mud can slow or halt military advances, as can faulty or insufficient wintertime equipment. Some military equipment may need to be adapted for colder weather, and shortages of equipment or ammunition could slow advances due to logistical difficulties — not winter weather.<sup>[3]</sup> Winter weather could disproportionately harm poorly-equipped Russian forces in Ukraine, but well-supplied Ukrainian forces are unlikely to halt their counteroffensives due to the arrival of winter weather and may be able to take advantage of frozen terrain to move more easily than they could in the muddy autumn months. If fighting does halt this winter, it will be due to logistical challenges and the culmination of several campaigns on both sides. The Russian campaigns to capture all of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts all culminated months ago (despite the repeated insistence of Russian forces on launching ineffective attacks), and Russian forces are firmly on the defensive across most of the frontline.

**Ukraine holds the initiative and is in the process of securing a major victory in Kherson. A ceasefire would provide the Kremlin with the pause it desperately needs to reconstitute Russian forces.** The major Ukrainian victory underway in Kherson Oblast will not be Ukraine’s last. Fighting will continue on the southern axis; in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast (the only place Russian forces are still attempting meaningful offensives); and in northern Luhansk Oblast as Ukrainian forces continue counteroffensive operations. Russian officials are busy attempting to train 120,000 conscripts to deploy to the frontlines in the spring.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian forces likely aim to liberate as much occupied territory as possible before those Russian reinforcements arrive. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on November 7 that Ukraine is unwilling to negotiate with Russian forces until certain conditions are met, including the restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, the prosecution of Russian war criminals, payment for war damages, and promises that Russia will not again invade Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> A wintertime ceasefire would only benefit Russian forces, who would use that opportunity to bolster their faltering defenses and continue their genocidal campaign to eradicate Ukrainian identity in occupied parts of Ukraine.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is increasingly wrestling with St. Petersburg officials over expanding Wagner Group operations in the city.** Prigozhin’s press service stated that St. Petersburg officials refused to provide a permit for the newly opened Wagner Center in St. Petersburg on a technicality.<sup>[6]</sup> The press service noted that St. Petersburg officials are deliberately refusing to issue the permit based on their “ideological” differences, given that Wagner received the permission to construct the center in July.<sup>[7]</sup> The press service added that Wagner had petitioned the court and will take the issue further if the court recognizes St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov and his government have committed any “crimes.”<sup>[8]</sup> Prigozhin also accused Beglov and other St. Petersburg “liberal” businessmen of financially supporting Ukrainian “nationalists” and betraying Russia in response to the situation.<sup>[9]</sup> Prigozhin has previously accused Beglov of failing to support the Russian war effort and demanded his resignation, likely as a result of resistance from Beglov on expanding Wagner’s presence in St. Petersburg.<sup>[10]</sup> ISW also reported that a Russian nationalist outlet *Pravda.Ru*, which consistently reports on Prigozhin-related news, published a defamatory piece on Beglov’s uninterest in creating volunteer battalions in August.<sup>[11]</sup> Prigozhin is increasingly weaponizing his role in the Russian invasion of Ukraine to push his business aspirations.

**Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yuriy Ignat stated that Russian forces will likely further reduce the pace of their campaign to strike Ukrainian critical infrastructure, likely enabling Ukrainian authorities to address most of the damage to infrastructure.** Ignat announced on November 10 that on the night of November 9 to 10 Russian forces did not conduct any air or cruise missile strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure facilities.<sup>[12]</sup> Ignat stated that Russian forces have begun to stockpile high-precision weapons systems to launch a future massive campaign reminiscent of the October 10 strikes, because small numbers of daily cruise missile and drone strikes are now generating few results.<sup>[13]</sup> Ignat stated Russian forces spent months accumulating the high-precision weapons systems they used in the October campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.<sup>[14]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have greatly depleted their arsenal of high-precision weapons systems and have suffered significant aviation losses and therefore would struggle to maintain the pace of their campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure.<sup>[15]</sup> It will likely take Russian forces months to accumulate the number of high-precision weapons systems needed to return to the pace of strikes it conducted in mid-October despite Ignat’s reporting that Russian

factories are drastically increasing the manufacturing of cruise missiles.[16] Ukrainian officials have previously stated that they could restore energy supplies to communities in Ukraine within a matter of a few weeks if the pace of the Russian campaign dramatically slowed.[17] ISW also assessed that Russian President Vladimir Putin may have ordered the campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure to curry favor with the Russian pro-war nationalist camp that has been consistently demanding escalation in Ukraine.[18] A reduced pace in the campaign will likely contribute to renewed criticisms from the pro-war nationalist camp. Russian forces likely retain the capability to damage Ukrainian critical infrastructure and impose costs on Ukrainian civilians in the winter but are unlikely to be able to inflict decisive — and lasting — damage.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces steadily advanced in Kherson Oblast on November 10 as Russian forces conduct a withdrawal to the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.
- The Russian withdrawal will take some time to complete, and fighting will continue throughout Kherson Oblast as Ukrainian troops advance and come up against pre-prepared Russian defensive lines, especially around Kherson City.
- ISW does not assess the fighting in Ukraine will halt or enter a stalemate due to winter weather, despite faulty Western assumptions.
- Ukraine holds the initiative and is in the process of securing a major victory in Kherson. A ceasefire would provide the Kremlin with the pause it desperately needs to reconstitute Russian forces.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is increasingly wrestling with St. Petersburg officials over expanding Wagner Group recruitment in the city.
- Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yurii Ignat stated that Russian force will likely slow the pace of their campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure.
- Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations on the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk.
- Russian forces began constructing second line fortifications in Crimea and southern Ukraine.
- Russian citizens continue to oppose Russia's war in Ukraine through protest, social media dissent, and desertions from the military.
- Russian mobilization efforts are channeling personnel to the Wagner group.
- Russian occupation officials are continuing efforts to erode Ukrainian national identity while mobilizing residents in Russian-occupied territories.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 10, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 9

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Nicholas Carl, and Mason Clark

November 9, 9:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) ordered Russian forces on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River to begin withdrawing to the east (left) bank on November 9. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered the withdrawal of Russian troops across the Dnipro River during a highly staged televised meeting with Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovikin on November 9. During the televised meeting, Surovikin recommended the withdrawal and Shoigu accepted his decision, giving Surovikin the task of ensuring the "safe transfer of personnel, weapons, and equipment" to the east (left) bank.<sup>[1]</sup> Shoigu and Surovikin's statements mark the beginning of a steady, fighting withdrawal by Russian troops across the Dnipro to prepared positions on the east (left) bank to preserve the combat power of Russian units, including elements of the 76th and 106th Airborne Assault Divisions and 22nd Army Corps.<sup>[2]</sup> Surovikin notably stated that half of the troops withdrawn from the west bank of the Dnipro will be redeployed to other areas of Ukraine. The entire Russian contingent will take some time to withdraw across the Dnipro River and it is still unclear if Russian forces will be able to conduct the withdrawal in relatively good order under Ukrainian pressure. **The battle of Kherson is not over, but Russian forces have entered a new phase—prioritizing withdrawing their forces across the river in good order and delaying Ukrainian forces, rather than seeking to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensive entirely.**

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kherson direction since August—a coordinated interdiction campaign to force Russian forces to withdraw across the Dnipro without necessitating major Ukrainian ground offensives—has likely succeeded.** As ISW has observed over the previous months, Ukrainian forces engaged in a purposeful and well-executed campaign to target Russian concentration areas, military assets, and logistics nodes throughout Kherson Oblast to make continued Russian positions on the west bank untenable without having to conduct large-scale and costly ground maneuvers to liberate territory.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian troops launched constant attacks on bridges across the Dnipro River and targeted supply centers and ammunition depots on the east bank of the Dnipro that degraded the ability of Russian forces to supply the grouping on the west bank; Ukrainian forces combined these strikes with prudent and successful ground attacks on key locations such as Davydov Brid. This campaign has come to fruition. Surovikin directly acknowledged that Russian forces cannot supply their grouping in Kherson City and the surrounding areas due to Ukrainian strikes on critical Russian supply lines to the west bank.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian sources noted that the withdrawal is a natural consequence of targeted and systematic Ukrainian strikes that cost the Russian grouping on the west bank its major supply arteries, which gradually attrited their overall strength and capabilities.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The Russian withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro is unlikely to be a trap meant to lure Ukrainian troops into costly combat near Kherson City, as some Ukrainian and Western sources have suggested.<sup>[6]</sup>** ISW has previously observed many indicators that Russian forces, military and economic assets, and occupation elements have steadily withdrawn from the west bank across the Dnipro River, and Russian officials have been anticipating and preparing for withdrawal in a way that is incompatible with a campaign to deceive and trap Ukrainian troops.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian commanders will certainly attempt to slow Ukrainian advances to maintain an orderly withdrawal, and some forces may remain to delay Ukrainian troops in Kherson City itself—but this fighting will be a means to the end of withdrawing as many Russian units as possible in good order.

**The Russian information space predictably reacted to the announcement of the withdrawal with varying degrees of ire and concern.** Several Russian milbloggers emphasized that the withdrawal is the natural consequence of systematic failures within Russian military and command structures and framed the withdrawal as an inevitable result of political nuances beyond the realm of military control.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian sources also emphasized that this is a major defeat for Russian forces because they are losing territory that Russia annexed and claims as its own.<sup>[9]</sup>

**However, many prominent voices in the milblogger space sided with Surovikin and lauded the decision as a necessary one, indicating that Russian leadership has learned from the information effects of the disastrous Russian withdrawal from Kharkiv Oblast in mid-September.<sup>[10]</sup>** A prominent Russian milblogger that has previously stridently criticized the conduct of Russian operations stated that Surovikin “got the inheritance he got” managing operations in Kherson Oblast, and implied that Surovikin did the best he could under the circumstances, so he ultimately cannot be blamed.<sup>[11]</sup> Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin voiced his support for the withdrawal and called it the “greatest achievement” made by Surovikin due to Surovikin’s stated desire to preserve the safety of Russian troops.<sup>[12]</sup> Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov agreed with Prigozhin’s assessment and claimed Surovikin saved thousands of lives and is seeking more advantageous positions.<sup>[13]</sup> These responses, particularly from Kadyrov and Prigozhin, are markedly different from scathing critiques previously leveled at Commander of the Grouping of Russian forces “Center” in Ukraine Colonel General Alexander Lapin following massive Russian losses in eastern Kharkiv and northern Donetsk oblasts.<sup>[14]</sup> Surovikin has steadily established an informational cover for his decision-making and the eventual Russian withdrawal from positions in Kherson Oblast since the announcement of his appointment as theatre commander of Russian Forces in Ukraine. Surovikin stated that Russian leadership will need to make “difficult decisions” regarding Kherson Oblast as early as October 19.<sup>[15]</sup> The Kremlin and senior Russian commanders appear to have learned informational and military lessons from previous failures and will likely apply these to the presentation and conduct of this withdrawal. Russian President Vladimir Putin has not commented on the withdrawal as of this publication, suggesting that the Kremlin is framing the withdrawal as a purely military decision.

**Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev met with senior Iranian officials in Tehran on November 9, likely to discuss the sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia and other forms of cooperation.** Patrushev met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani.<sup>[16]</sup> The SNSC is Iran’s highest defense and security policy body and reports directly to the supreme leader. Iranian readouts of Patrushev’s meetings largely focused on economic and political cooperation, while Russian readouts emphasized that the discussion focused on security affairs.<sup>[17]</sup> Patrushev and Shamkhani discussed “measures to counter interference by Western secret services in the two countries’ internal affairs,” according to Russia’s TASS. Iranian officials have repeatedly accused the United States and its allies

of stoking the ongoing protests throughout Iran.[18] Patrushev's visit to Tehran notably comes amid reports that Iran is seeking Russian help with protest suppression, although it is unclear whether Patrushev discussed such cooperation.[19] Patrushev likely sought to secure additional Iranian precision munitions to replenish Russia's dwindling stocks.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) ordered Russian forces on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River to begin withdrawing to the east (left) bank on November 9.
- The battle of Kherson is not inherently over, but Russian forces have entered a new phase—prioritizing withdrawing their forces across the river in good order and delaying Ukrainian forces, rather than seeking to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensive entirely.
- Many prominent voices in the Russian milblogger space sided with Surovikin and lauded the decision as a necessary one, indicating that Russian leadership has learned from the information effects of the disastrous Russian withdrawal from Kharkiv Oblast in mid-September.
- Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev met with senior Iranian officials in Tehran on November 9, likely to discuss the sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia and other forms of cooperation
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported continued fighting along the Svatove-Kremmina highway and Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces made territorial gains northeast of Kherson City and continued their successful interdiction campaign.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects are struggling to pay mobilized personnel, and the Russian military is struggling to provision them.
- Relatives of mobilized personnel continue to protest lack of payment and poor conditions.
- Russian occupation deputy head of Kherson Oblast Kirill Stremousov was killed in a claimed car accident in rear Kherson Oblast the day Russian forces announced their withdrawal from the west bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Occupation authorities in rear areas are likely increasing law enforcement crackdowns and filtration measures amid fears of Ukrainian counteroffensives after the November 9 withdrawal announcement

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Nicholas Carl, and Mason Clark

November 8, 7:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Iranian state-run outlet *Nour News Agency* reported that Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev arrived in Tehran on November 8, likely to discuss the potential sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia.[1] *Nour News Agency* announced Patrushev's arrival in an English-language tweet, stating that Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani invited Patrushev and noted that Patrushev will also meet with other high-ranking Iranian political and economic officials to discuss Russo-Iranian cooperation.[2] *Nour News Agency* is affiliated with the SNSC. The SNSC likely announced Patrushev's arrival in Iran to highlight the deepening cooperation between Moscow and Tehran to an international audience (rather than domestically), as well as to implicitly highlight that a high-ranking Russian official turned to Iran for help in Ukraine. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani notably traveled to Moscow in 2015 to appeal to Russia to intervene in the Syrian Civil War. Tehran is likely eager to publicly signal this rebalancing of its strategic partnership with Moscow, especially to regional Iranian adversaries with which the Kremlin occasionally cooperates, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.[3] Patrushev's visit to Iran notably comes amid reports that the Iranian regime is seeking Russian help with protest suppression, although it is unclear if this will be discussed by Patrushev and his Iranian counterpart.[4]

**The Kremlin is continuing efforts to covertly acquire munitions for use in Ukraine to mitigate the effects of international sanctions and backfill Russia's ongoing depletion of domestic munitions stockpiles.** British outlet *Sky News* reported on November 8 that the Kremlin flew 140 million euros in cash and a selection of captured British-made NLAW anti-tank missiles, US-made Javelin anti-tank missiles, and a Stinger anti-aircraft missile to Tehran on August 20 in exchange for 160 additional Shahed-136 drones for use in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on November 8 that Tehran continues to supply Moscow with Mohajer, Arash, and Shahed-type drones by air and sea via both Iranian state-owned and privately-owned entities.<sup>[6]</sup> The Ukrainian Resistance Center additionally reported that due to failures of the Russian military-industrial complex, Russian military leaders are continuing their efforts to procure dual-use (military and non-military use) goods such as computer chips, quadcopters, night vision devices, and bulletproof vests from Turkey and are using cryptocurrency transactions to avoid purchase tracking.<sup>[7]</sup> Taken in tandem, these reports indicate that the Kremlin seeks to circumvent sanctions by engaging in quid-pro-quo and under-the-table negotiations with foreign actors.

**Wagner Group forces are continuing to exaggerate their claimed territorial gains in Donbas to further distinguish themselves from proxy and conventional Russian forces.** Russian sources began reporting on November 7 that a detachment of Wagner forces and troops of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) 6th Cossack Regiment broke through Ukrainian defensive lines in Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[8]</sup> On November 8, however, Russian coverage largely shifted and Russian milbloggers began claiming that reports of the 6th Cossack Regiment's involvement in operations near Bilohorivka are false and that Wagner troops were solely responsible for purported gains.<sup>[9]</sup> As ISW has previously observed, Wagner has taken sole credit for Russian gains around Bakhmut in order to bolster their own reputation as the Kremlin's favored strike force, despite not being the only force deployed in the area.<sup>[10]</sup> Wagner will likely use Bilohorivka to accomplish a similar effect.

#### Key Takeaways

- Iranian sources announced—without Russian confirmation—that Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev arrived in Tehran on November 8, likely to discuss the potential sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia. Iran likely announced Patrushev's arrival to highlight the deepening cooperation between Moscow and Tehran to an international audience, as well as to implicitly highlight that a high-ranking Russian official turned to Iran for help in Ukraine.
- Wagner Group forces are continuing to exaggerate their claimed territorial gains in Donbas to further distinguish themselves from proxy and conventional Russian forces.
- Ukrainian forces likely made marginal gains northwest of Svatove, Luhansk Oblast, and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces intensified offensive operations toward Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian authorities attempted to counteract Russian authorities' continued efforts to strengthen control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- The disproportionate financial burden of Russian force generation efforts continues to fall primarily on Russian regional governments' budgets, prompting public backlash.
- Financial and bureaucratic issues are continuing to hinder Russian efforts to replenish formerly elite units defending critical areas of the front line, potentially threatening the integrity of Russian defenses in occupied parts of Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast may be trying to force residents out of the western part of the oblast by cutting communications on the west bank of the Dnipro River.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, and Mason Clark

November 7, 8pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) issued a rare statement on November 7 in response to extensive Russian milblogger outcry on November 6 about reported extensive losses and poor command within the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet.** Russian milbloggers published and circulated a letter that claimed Russian military leadership “threw” the brigade into an “incomprehensible offensive” near Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast, where it suffered losses amounting to over 300 killed, wounded, and missing and lost half of its equipment, all within four days. The letter explicitly blamed Eastern Military District Commander Lieutenant General Rustam Muradov, 155th Naval Infantry Brigade Commander Colonel Zurab Akhmedov, and Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov for the brigade’s losses and called on Primorsky Krai Governor Oleg Kozhemyako to conduct an independent review of the actions of the officers involved in planning and conducting the recent Russian offensive push in western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> The tone of many Russian milblogger responses to the letter resembles the response following the destruction of a Russian motorized rifle brigade crossing the Slverskyi Donets River on May 11, after which many pro-war milbloggers increased their direct criticism of the Russian military.<sup>[2]</sup>

The Russian MoD issued a rare response on November 7 to the outcry on and claimed that less than one percent of the brigade was killed and less than seven percent was wounded within the past 10 days, and that Ukrainian forces suffered high losses instead.<sup>[3]</sup> Kozhemyako also sought to address the outcry and claimed that the brigade’s losses are greatly exaggerated and (without providing evidence) speculated that the letter was a product of Ukrainian special services.<sup>[4]</sup> Kozhemyako stated that he contacted the brigade’s command and referred the case to the Russian military prosecutor.<sup>[5]</sup> Some Russian milbloggers agreed, claiming that Russian losses could not be as high as the brigade claimed, even calling the brigade’s letter exaggerated or fake.<sup>[6]</sup> **The Russian MoD has remained remarkably tight-lipped about milblogger critiques of Russian failures throughout the war in Ukraine — unlike the Kremlin, which will occasionally indirectly address milblogger narratives. The MoD’s public response to milblogger outcry indicates that some Russian milbloggers have considerable leverage to shape MoD interactions in the information space and additionally suggests that the situation in Pavlivka is dire enough to warrant a response.**

**Discourse regarding the widespread failures of the Russian military establishment has pervaded beyond the milblogger information space and is increasingly coloring social dynamics.** Russian milbloggers stated that women, presumably relatives of Russian military and mobilized personnel, have been calling attention to the failing state of the war by reaching out to milbloggers and local government officials.<sup>[7]</sup> ISW has observed multiple instances of Russian military personnel’s wives and mothers advocating for their relatives serving in the military by reaching out to local officials and prominent Russian milbloggers since the beginning of partial mobilization in late September.<sup>[8]</sup> The Russian MoD’s failure to properly address these systemic issues and their root causes will likely exacerbate these societal tensions throughout the war.

**The Russian pro-war *siloviki* faction is increasing its influence in part to advance personal interests in Russia and occupied Ukraine, not strictly to win the war.** Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed on November 6 that Wagner is opening training and management centers for people’s militias in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts that will function outside of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>[9]</sup> ISW previously assessed that Prigozhin is undertaking efforts to strengthen his independent power base following his reported meeting with Kursk Oblast businessmen on the creation of regional people’s militia that symbolically occurred on Russia’s Unity Day (November 4).<sup>[10]</sup> Prigozhin emphasized that Russian officials must assign regional businesses the responsibility to supply the militia rather than relying on the Kremlin. Prigozhin’s Unity Day media appearances also captured the same notion of cooperation between the Russian government and business, which likely indicates that he is attempting to grow his Wagner-focused power base in Russia while undercutting unified Russian operations in Ukraine. Prigozhin also started construction of an independent fortification dubbed the “Wagner Line” in Belgorod Oblast in late October.<sup>[11]</sup> Prigozhin consistently defames St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov, and the recent grand opening of the Wagner Center in St. Petersburg on Unity Day may suggest that Prigozhin is attempting to infiltrate the city’s business sphere.<sup>[12]</sup>

Another member of the *siloviki* party, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, is also reportedly attempting to secure business opportunities on the back of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Resistance Center noted that Kadyrov and his field commanders are growing business networks in the occupied territories, and Ukrainian officials previously claimed that Kadyrov’s men received loot from Mariupol for their participation in the seizure of the city in March–April.<sup>[13]</sup> ISW cannot independently verify the validity of these Ukrainian statements, but Kadyrov is behaving in line with Prigozhin by advertising enlistment into his forces and undermining the formal Russian Armed Forces.<sup>[14]</sup> Kadyrov, for example, advertised his provision of military equipment to a proxy unit in occupied Donetsk Oblast on November 7; and Prigozhin similarly provided equipment to a Russian unit prior.<sup>[15]</sup>

Both Prigozhin and Kadyrov remain independent figures within Russia due to Putin's dependency on their forces in Ukraine. Russian journalists often ask Prigozhin about his ambitions for the Kremlin, which despite his repeated denials, show that he has created a public perception of his possibly entering a position of power.[16] Such discussions deviate from Putin's decades-long positioning of himself as the only viable leader for Russia. Prigozhin also likely maintains his access to key Kremlin officials, and the Ukrainian Resistance Center even reported that he had an unofficial meeting with Putin's administration head Anton Vaino.[17] Prigozhin and Vaino allegedly discussed Putin's negative influence over the Russian military campaign and distaste for Russian higher military command. The existence of this meeting is impossible to confirm in open sources, but Western officials previously confirmed that Prigozhin directly addressed Putin regarding military failures in Ukraine in October.[18]

**Prigozhin is continuing to pose himself as a Russian strongman within foreign affairs by promoting his own engagement in election interference.** Prigozhin sarcastically acknowledged *Bloomberg* reports regarding his involvement in the US 2022 midterm elections, telling US government-funded outlet *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*: "Gentlemen, we interfered, we interfere and we will interfere."<sup>[19]</sup> Prigozhin's admission to a US publication a day prior to US elections on November 8 likely intends both to undermine public perception of the validity of election results and promote Prigozhin to a Russian audience as a capable actor — in line with Prigozhin's previous public admittance that he finances the Wagner Group, which he previously denied for years.

**Russian forces have greatly depleted their arsenal of high-precision weapons systems and have suffered significant aviation losses and will likely struggle to maintain the current pace of the Russian military's coordinated campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.** Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces General Valery Zaluzhnyi stated on November 3 that Ukrainian forces have destroyed 278 aircraft compared to the Soviet Union's loss of 119 aircraft during 10 years of war in Afghanistan.<sup>[20]</sup> The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on November 7 that Russian forces are unlikely to replace these aviation losses in the next few months because they likely significantly outstrip Russian capacity to manufacture new airframes.<sup>[21]</sup> Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skitbitsky stated in a comment to the *Economist* on November 7 that Russian forces have used more than eighty percent of their modern missiles in the coordinated campaign to strike Ukrainian infrastructure and that Russian forces only have 120 Iskander missiles left.<sup>[22]</sup> ISW previously assessed that Russia has depleted its arsenal of high-precision weapon systems in its campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, which is intended to degrade Ukrainian popular will (but is highly unlikely to succeed).<sup>[23]</sup> Ukrainian sources reported on November 7 that Ukrainian officials and engineers could restore power supplies to normal levels in a few weeks if the pace of Russian strikes on critical infrastructure dramatically slowed.<sup>[24]</sup> Skitbitsky also reported that Russian officials have reached an agreement with Iranian officials to purchase Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar ballistic missile systems.<sup>[25]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces are increasingly reliant on Iranian-made weapon systems to support its coordinated strike campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.<sup>[26]</sup>

**Russian occupation authorities are likely beginning a new phase of evacuations from Kherson Oblast.** Kherson occupation deputy Kirill Stremousov stated that November 7 will be the last day of organized evacuations from the west bank of the Dnipro River.<sup>[27]</sup> A Russian milblogger similarly noted that November 7 is the end of centralized evacuations in Kherson Oblast and that private evacuates will continue from November 8.<sup>[28]</sup> Russian sources reported that the last boat transporting civilians from Kherson City to the east bank of the Dnipro departed on November 8 due to concerns of "increased threats to the civilian population."<sup>[29]</sup> The purported shift from centralized to privatized evacuation efforts suggests that Russian occupation officials have completed evacuation under formal guidelines and will increasingly continue evacuations from areas in Kherson Oblast on a more *ad hoc* and case-by-case basis. Russian officials may also be setting further information conditions to accuse Ukrainian forces of endangering civilian life by framing the end of centralized, administration-led evacuations as necessary to protect civilians.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) issued a rare statement on November 7 in response to extensive Russian milblogger outcry about reported extensive losses and poor command within the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet.
- The Russian pro-war *siloviki* faction (including Yevgeny Prigozhin and Ramzan Kadyrov) is increasing its influence in part to advance personal interests in Russia and occupied Ukraine, not strictly to win the war.
- Russian forces have greatly depleted their arsenal of high-precision weapons systems and have suffered significant aviation losses and will likely struggle to maintain the current pace of the Russian military's coordinated campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.

- Russian occupation authorities likely began a new phase of evacuations from Kherson Oblast.
- Russian troops continued efforts to fix Ukrainian troops against the international border in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops continued counteroffensive operations in the Svatove direction.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian troops conducted limited counterattacks to regain lost positions west of Kremminna.
- Russian sources widely claimed that proxy and Wagner Group troops entered the outskirts of Bilohorivka.
- Russian sources reported that Ukrainian troops are massing in the Kherson Oblast direction.
- Russian troops continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited interdiction efforts against Russian concentration areas in Zaporizhzhia Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to make public statements and signed additional decrees to portray himself as taking steps to fix fundamental problems with partial mobilization in Russia.
- Russian and occupation officials continue to abduct Ukrainian children, intimidate civilians, and escalate filtration measures.



[Click here to read the full report.](#)

November 6, 7:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, November 6. This report discusses the recent reduction of nuclear threats by key Kremlin figures and the likely role of Russia's military leadership and the international community in prompting this change, and the risks of further Russian nuclear saber rattling.**

**Key Kremlin officials began collectively deescalating their rhetoric regarding the use of nuclear weapons in early November.** The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released a statement on "the prevention of nuclear war" on November 2, stating that Russia "is strictly and consistently guided by the postulate of the inadmissibility of a nuclear war in which there can be no winners, and which must never be unleashed." The Russian MFA also stated that it is committed to the reduction and limitation of nuclear weapons.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on October 27 that Russia has no need to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine and claimed Russia has never discussed the possibility of using nuclear weapons, only "hinting at the statements made by leaders of Western countries."<sup>[2]</sup> The deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, has similarly increasingly downplayed the fiery nuclear rhetoric he used throughout October and is now focusing on promoting Russian unity in the war in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Putin and key Kremlin officials had increased their references to the use of nuclear weapons from Putin's September 30 annexation speech and throughout October, likely to pressure Ukraine into negotiations and to reduce Western support for Kyiv.** Putin made several general references to nuclear weapons in his September 30 speech but avoided directly threatening the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>[4]</sup> Putin's rhetoric during this speech and throughout October was consistent with his previous nuclear threats and failed to generate the degree of fear within the Ukrainian government that the Kremlin likely intended.<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated on October 24 that the Russian nuclear threat has remained at the same level even prior to the start of the war.<sup>[6]</sup> The Kremlin also escalated its nuclear rhetoric after Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast and during Ukrainian counteroffensives in Lyman and northern Kherson Oblast in early October. The Kremlin likely continued its thinly veiled nuclear threats to deflect from their military and mobilization problems and to intimidate Ukraine's Western partners.

**The Kremlin's rhetorical shift indicates that senior Russian military commanders and elements of the Kremlin are likely to some extent aware of the massive costs for little operational gain Russia would incur for the use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine or NATO.** The *New York Times*, citing senior US officials, reported that senior Russian defense officials discussed the conditions for nuclear use against the backdrop of growing nuclear narratives in mid-October.<sup>[7]</sup> The meeting reportedly did not involve Putin. Putin's illegal September 30 annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts, much of which Russian forces do not occupy, likely overcomplicated existing Russian military doctrine. Russian nuclear doctrine clearly allows for nuclear weapons use in response to "aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy," which the Kremlin could conceivably apply to Ukrainian advances into claimed "Russian" territory in Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> All of the current frontlines fall within claimed Russian territory, and Putin has not publicly defined what now constitutes an attack on Russian territory. It is possible that senior Russian military officials are equally confused about the application of Putin's annexation order to existing military doctrine. ISW previously reported that Putin's annexation order was likely a polarizing issue that ignited a fracture within the Kremlin, creating pro-war and pro-negotiations factions.<sup>[9]</sup> US officials also noted that they have not observed any indicators that Russia has moved its nuclear weapons or undertaken any preparatory steps to prepare for a strike.<sup>[10]</sup>

**Kremlin-run television shows still air the occasional nuclear threat, which are common in Russia's jingoistic domestic information space.** For example, Russia's State Duma Committee Chairman on Defense, Andrey Kartapolov, briefly discussed nuclear threats on Russian state TV on November 5 despite the general softening of the Kremlin's narrative.<sup>[11]</sup> Russian state TV (alongside some populist figures) have previously amplified nuclear threats prior to Russian military failures in the autumn, and their rhetorical flourishes should not be misconstrued as indicators of the Kremlin's official position. Figures such as the late Russian ultra-nationalist and then leader of the Liberal Democratic Party Vladimir Zhirinovsky made regular and outlandish nuclear threats on Russian state broadcasts for years, even threatening to drop a "little" nuclear bomb on the residence of then-Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in 2018.<sup>[12]</sup> The Russian milblogger community largely did not interact with these nuclear narratives and continued to criticize that Russian military command for its conventional battlefield failures. Russian propagandists will continue to make these threats as a way of reminding domestic audiences of Russia's might amidst clear military failures on the frontlines.

**The Kremlin likely privately clarified its nuclear policies to deescalate with the United States and its allies.** US and allied officials reported that US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has been in contact with Putin's foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov and Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev in an effort to reduce the risk of nuclear use.<sup>[13]</sup> The Russian Ambassador to the United

Kingdom, Andrey Kelin, also noted on October 26 that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu made several calls to his counterparts, reportedly assuring them that Russia is uninterested in using nuclear weapons in the war.<sup>[14]</sup> China might have also played a role in pressuring the Kremlin to reduce its nuclear threats. Chinese President Xi Jinping stated on November 4 that “the international community should... jointly oppose the use or threats to use nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons must not be used and nuclear wars must not be fought, in order to prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia.”<sup>[15]</sup> Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe likely expressed a similar notion to Shoigu during an October 26 call.<sup>[16]</sup>

**The Kremlin may conduct future rhetorical nuclear brinksmanship in an effort to prompt the United States and its allies to pressure Ukraine to negotiate; the Kremlin will be unable to directly force Kyiv to negotiate through nuclear threats.** ISW continues to assess that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine remains unlikely and that the Kremlin is currently taking steps to deescalate its nuclear rhetoric. The Kremlin’s nuclear threats failed to undermine Ukrainian political and societal will to continue to oppose Russia’s invasion. As ISW wrote on September 30, “Ukraine and its international backers have made clear that they will not accept negotiations at gunpoint and will not renounce Ukraine’s sovereign right to its territories.”<sup>[17]</sup> **The United States and its allies should not undermine Ukraine’s continued dedication to recapturing all Russian-occupied territory and halting Russia’s genocidal invasion.**

**Key inflections in ongoing military operations on November 6:**

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed on November 6 that the Wagner Group is creating training and management centers for local “people’s militias” in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts.<sup>[18]</sup>
- Russian milbloggers amplified reports that the Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade sustained severe losses during the recent offensive push towards Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[19]</sup>
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Svatove and Kremminna.<sup>[20]</sup>
- Russian opposition sources reported that Ukrainian shelling near Makiivka, Luhansk Oblast may have killed up to 500 Russian mobilized personnel in one day.<sup>[21]</sup>
- Russian forces continued establishing defensive positions on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[22]</sup> Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign against Russian logistics in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[23]</sup>
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar. <sup>[24]</sup> Russian sources claimed that Russian forces broke through Ukrainian defenses near Bakhmut, made marginal gains south of Avdiivka, and remained impaled near Pavlivka in western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[25]</sup>
- Ukrainian personnel repaired two external power lines to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on November 5, resuming the supply of electricity to the ZNPP after shelling deenergized the facility on November 3.<sup>[26]</sup>
- Russian occupation officials continued to cite the threat of a Ukrainian strike on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Station to justify the continued forced relocation of civilians in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[27]</sup>
- Russian occupation officials continued to forcibly transfer Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Russia under the guise of “vacation” schemes.<sup>[28]</sup>
- Russian forces continued to struggle with domestic resistance to and poor provisioning of ongoing mobilization efforts.<sup>[29]</sup>

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 6, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 5

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark

November 5, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin seeks to obfuscate his efforts to strengthen his independent power base with an appeal to the concept of Russia's historic unity. Prigozhin provided a vague response to a media inquiry regarding his recent visit to Kursk Oblast on Russia's Unity Day (November 4), during which he had indirectly implied that Wagner forces are involved in upholding Russia's unity.<sup>[1]</sup> Prigozhin stated that Russian people, businesses, government, and army need to come together to fight for Russia's sovereignty and its great future while deflecting from the journalist's question regarding Prigozhin's reported meeting with Kursk businessmen about the organization of an unspecified people's militia – outside of formal Russian military command structures. Prigozhin also noted that Russia has all the ingredients to achieve its goals including a strong president, cohesive army, and great nationhood, which he concluded with an out-of-place greeting from Wagner fighters. Prigozhin later claimed in a follow up media response that his "independence" does not contradict Russian President Vladimir Putin's politics as some audiences have interpreted.<sup>[2]</sup>

Prigozhin's rather sarcastic statements have several underlying implications for his perception of his power within Russia. ISW previously reported that Kursk Oblast officials announced the construction of second and third lines of defenses in the region, and if Prigozhin's meeting with local businessmen took place, may indicate that he is attempting to expand his influence in the region.<sup>[3]</sup> Prigozhin's comment on Russia's "cohesive army" next to Putin was likely thinly-veiled sarcasm, given that Prigozhin has repeatedly criticized the Russian Armed Forces on numerous occasions.<sup>[4]</sup> Prigozhin

also directly recognized that he is an independent entity, which as ISW previously assessed, relieves him of some obligations to the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).<sup>[5]</sup> Putin's dependency on Prigozhin's forces around Bakhmut also allows Prigozhin privileges such as voicing his criticisms of the Kremlin or the Russian Armed Forces without significant ramifications. Prigozhin has also coincidentally opened his Wagner Center in St. Petersburg on Russia's Unity Day.<sup>[6]</sup> However, Prigozhin is notably shielding his efforts to build an independent power base and shape the conduct of Russia's invasion of Ukraine with language focused on Russian Unity – likely both to appeal to Russian nationalists and civilians and to deflect criticism of his fairly overt efforts to build an independent power base.

**Prigozhin continues to rely on ineffective convicts to staff his forces.** Prigozhin declined to comment on a reporter's question regarding ongoing recruitment drives at Krasnoyarsk Krai penal colonies, despite previously openly discussing prisoner participation in the war with Russian outlets like *RiaFan*.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian opposition outlet *The Insider*, however, found that over 500 prisoners recruited into Wagner units have died in the past two months.<sup>[8]</sup> The publication added that Wagner lost between 800 and 1,000 mercenaries in Ukraine, indicating convicts comprise a large proportion of Wagner's forces in Ukraine. Ukrainian intelligence officials also previously reported that many prisoners suffering from infectious diseases infected Wagner troops, to which Prigozhin responded that he does not discriminate on the basis of illness.<sup>[9]</sup>

**Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian confirmed that Iran sent Russia combat drones.** Amir-Abdollahian stated on November 5 that Iran "gave a limited number of drones to Russia months before" the war in Ukraine.<sup>[10]</sup> Amir-Abdollahian also claimed that if Ukrainian officials could prove that the Russian military has used Iranian-made drones in Ukraine then Iranian officials would "not be indifferent" to the concern - falsely and ridiculously implying that Russia has not used the drones that he admitted Iran has provided.<sup>[11]</sup> Iran's confirmation of the drone shipments further supports ISW's previous assessments that Russia is sourcing Iranian-made weapons systems to address the depletion of its high-precision munitions arsenal.<sup>[12]</sup> ISW previously assessed that Iran is likely already exploiting Russian reliance on these Iranian-made weapons systems to request Russian assistance with its nuclear program.<sup>[13]</sup> The nuclear assistance requests and the recognition of the drone shipments are both indicators that Iranian officials may intend to more clearly establish an explicit bilateral security relationship with Russia in which they are more equal partners.

**Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Security Minister and current DNR military commander Aleksandr Khodakovsky claimed on November 5 that Russian friendly fire may have caused up to 60% of total Russian losses since the end of Russian offensive operations in Mariupol in mid-May.**<sup>[14]</sup> Even if this statistic is exaggerated, the fact that a Russian commander is publicly speculating on such a damning indicator of Russian and proxy competency indicates the deep challenges Russian forces face. Friendly fire typically does account for a limited number of losses in war but ordinarily nowhere near 60% of total casualties, which demonstrates a lack of communication and command and control coordination between Russian forces. Russian and Ukrainian sources also reported that a Russian rotation returning to its base near Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast on November 5 drove into a ditch constructed by army subcontractors without prior discussion or warning, further demonstrating a widespread lack of cross-training and coordination between Russian troops.<sup>[15]</sup> The frequent replacement of Russian military leaders, promotion of inexperienced soldiers, and cobbled-together Russian force composition including Russian contract soldiers, Russian mobilized soldiers, DNR and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) forces, and Wagner Group forces exacerbate the fragmented nature of the Russian chain of command and ineffectiveness of Russian forces and likely contributes to frequent friendly fire incidents.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Wagner Group financier Yevheniy Prigozhin seeks to obfuscate his efforts to strengthen his independent power base with an appeal to the concept of Russia's historic unity.**
- **Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian confirmed that Iran began providing Russia drones before February 24, but strangely denied that Russian forces have used them in combat.**
- **DNR military commander Aleksandr Khodakovsky claimed that Russian friendly fire may have caused up to 60% of total Russian losses since mid-May.**
- **Ukrainian troops reportedly continued counteroffensives along the Svatove-Kremenna line.**
- **Russian forces continued to set up defensive positions along the Dnipro River.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian logistics and transportation in Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian forces continued to attack around Bakhmut and claimed unspecified advances.**

- Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and in western Donetsk.
  - Continued poor conditions for mobilized soldiers catalyzed a large-scale protest in Kazan.
  - Unknown actors reportedly attempted to assassinate high-profile Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Supreme Court Judge Aleksandr Nikulin.
  - Russia continues to deploy personnel to staff administrative positions in occupied areas.
  - Russian forces continued forced evacuations in Kherson Oblast. Over 80% of Kherson residents reportedly have evacuated.
- 

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 4, 9:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian military is likely trying to use mobilized personnel to restart the Donetsk offensive but will likely still fail to achieve operationally significant gains. Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces General Valerii Zaluzhnyi reported on November 4 that Russian forces have tripled the intensity of hostilities in certain sections of the front with up to 80 daily assaults.<sup>[1]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are currently focusing those offensive operations in the direction of Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[2]</sup> The Ukrainian Eastern Group of troops spokesperson Serhiy Cherevatiy stated on November 4 that Russian forces are likely trying to seize Bakhmut and Soledar in Donetsk Oblast so that Russia can declare some type of success by announcing the "liberation" of the Donbas (even though those gains would not give Russia control over the entire region).<sup>[3]</sup> Cherevatiy also noted the presence of mobilized men in the Bakhmut direction, an area that should not in principle see many mobilized personnel given the extensive presence in this area of Wagner Group and proxy units that should not be receiving large numbers of Russian reservists.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW previously assessed that Russian forces prematurely impaled an insufficient concentration of mobilized personnel on offensive pushes near Bakhmut and Vuhledar in Donetsk Oblast on November 3.<sup>[5]</sup> The apparent intensification of Russian assaults in Donetsk Oblast likely indicates that Russian forces are repeating that mistake throughout this section of the front. The increased quantity of personnel at frontline positions may allow Russian forces to achieve some gains in Donetsk Oblast, but poor training, logistics, and command will continue to prevent Russian forces from making operationally significant gains that would materially affect the course or outcome of the war.

**Russian forces are setting conditions for a controlled withdrawal in northwestern Kherson Oblast, likely to avoid a disorderly rout from the right (west) bank of the Dnipro River.** Russian forces will likely need to engage in a fighting withdrawal to prevent Ukrainian forces from chasing them onto the left (eastern) bank. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command corrected social media reports from November 3 regarding the destruction of civilian boats and piers along the Dnipro River.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated that Russian forces are purposefully destroying civilian vessels and are restricting civilian use of watercraft and access to the shore. The corrected story likely corresponds with the reports of Russian forces preparing defensive positions on the left bank and the withdrawal of certain elements and suggests that Russian forces are eliminating ways for Ukrainian forces to chase them across the river during or after a withdrawal. Local Ukrainian sources also shared geolocated footage that reportedly showed the aftermath of the recent Russian destruction of a pedestrian bridge over the Inhulets River in Snihirivka (about 60km east of Mykolaiv City), which may also indicate Russian efforts to slow Ukrainian advances amidst a Russian withdrawal.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely setting conditions to continue covert mobilization, which suggests that partial mobilization did not generate sufficient forces for Putin's maximalist goals in Ukraine despite Putin's claims to the contrary.** Putin announced on November 4 that Russian forces mobilized 318,000 men of the 300,000 authorized due to the

recruitment of volunteers during the mobilization period.[8] Putin added that Russia had already committed 49,000 men to combat missions. Putin's claims of a successful and completed mobilization are inconsistent with his November 4 decree that allows Russian officials to mobilize citizens with outstanding convictions for some serious crimes.[9] Putin also signed decrees extending the status of servicemen to men serving in volunteer formations and outlining mobilization exemptions for citizens undergoing alternative service.[10] Such decrees likely indicate that Putin is preparing to continue covert mobilization in Russia by attempting to incentivize volunteer service or setting conditions to mobilize convicts—given that he has yet to sign an order terminating mobilization as of November 4. [11] Provisions authorizing the mobilization of prisoners may also indicate that Putin is trying to preempt social tensions by setting conditions to mobilize convicts instead of civilian Russian men.

Russian opposition and online outlets have reported that Russian authorities and businesses are preparing for a second mobilization wave by modernizing military recruitment centers and preparing lists of eligible men.[12] Rostov, Kursk, and Voronezh Oblast governors have also previously spoken about conducting a second wave of mobilization, and a few men reported receiving summonses for 2023.[13] While it is unclear if the Kremlin will double down on covert mobilization or initiate another mobilization wave, Putin's decrees are indicative of the persistent force generation challenges that have plagued the Russian military campaign.

**Russia's costly force generation efforts will continue to weigh on the Russian economy and could ignite social tensions if the Kremlin does not fulfill its financial obligations to the participants of the "special military operation."** Putin signed a decree granting a one-time payment of 195,000 rubles (about \$3,150) to mobilized men and individuals who had signed a contract after the declaration of partial mobilization on September 21.[14] By committing to pay mobilized men and giving the status of servicemen to volunteers the Kremlin is adding another financial burden to Russia's economy.[15] Russian governors are already releasing statements attempting to justify delays in compensating mobilized men and their families citing budget issues and the need to finance supplies for Russian servicemen.[16] Failures to make payouts to mobilized men are already causing social tensions in Chuvash Republic, for example, where 1,800 men are demanding that the region immediately pay the promised 400 million rubles (about \$6.5 million) to the mobilized population.[17]

**Iran is likely already exploiting Russian reliance on Iranian-made weapons systems to request Russian assistance with its nuclear program.** CNN reported on November 4 that unspecified US intelligence officials believe that Iranian officials have been asking Russia for help in acquiring additional nuclear materials and with nuclear fuel fabrication.[18] Nuclear fuel could allow Iran to shorten the breakout period to create a nuclear weapon depending on the kind of fuel and the kind of reactor for which it is being requested. CNN reported that it was unclear whether Russian officials had agreed to Iranian requests.[19] ISW has previously reported that Iranian plans to send more combat drones and possibly ballistic missile systems to Russia will likely strengthen Russia's growing reliance on Iranian-made weapons systems.[20]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Andriy Yusov stated on November 4 that GUR has not received information confirming that Iranian missile systems have arrived in Russia despite intelligence that confirms the contract for the transfer of those systems. [21] Yusov also stated that another shipment of 200 Iranian-made combat drones to Russia is currently underway.[22] Ukrainian Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov reported on November 4 that Russian forces have almost completely used up the first set of 300 combat drones from Iran. [23] Reznikov reported that Russia currently has contracts to receive 1,500 to 2,400 more Iranian-made combat drones, assuming Iran can fill the orders.[24] Russia's growing reliance on these systems allows Iran to exert greater influence on Russian officials, and Iranian officials have already likely started to exploit that influence in support of its nuclear program. The Iranian requests for Russian assistance with its nuclear program may be an indicator of an intensifying Russian-Iranian security partnership in which Iran and Russia are more equal partners.

**Russian forces may be deploying extreme measures against deserting personnel in an attempt to respond to severe morale issues.** The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on November 4 that Russian forces in Ukraine probably have started deploying "barrier troops" and "blocking units", units that threaten to shoot their own retreating personnel to compel offensives. [25] The UK MoD reported that Russian generals likely want their subordinate commanders to shoot deserters, including possibly authorizing personnel to shoot to kill their own deserting servicemen. [26] Desertion in the face of the enemy is a capital offense in many militaries, including America's. [27] The deployment of designated units or individuals behind friendly lines to shoot deserters is nevertheless indicative of just how low the morale, discipline, and cohesion of Russian military forces in parts of Ukraine have become.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian military is likely trying to use mobilized personnel to restart its Donetsk offensive but will likely fail to achieve operationally significant gains.
- Russian forces are setting conditions for an orderly withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River to avoid a rout in Kherson Oblast.
- President Vladimir Putin is likely setting conditions to continue mobilization covertly despite claims that partial mobilization produced sufficient forces.
- Russia's costly force generation measures will likely continue to weigh on the Russian economy and generate social tensions.
- Iran is likely exploiting Russian reliance on Iranian-made weapon systems to request Russian assistance with its nuclear program.
- Russian forces may be deploying extreme measures against deserting personnel in an attempt to respond to severe morale issues.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kremenna and Svatove.
- Russian forces continued to prepare existing and new defensive lines in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued forced evacuation measures in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian and occupation officials continued to set measures for the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 3

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 3, 9:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces are continuing to withdraw some elements from northwestern Kherson Oblast, but it is still unclear if Russian forces will fight for Kherson City. Kherson City occupation deputy Kirill Stremousov stated on November 3 that Russian forces "will most likely leave for the left (eastern) bank" of the Dnipro River urging civilians to evacuate from Kherson City "as quickly as possible."<sup>[1]</sup> ISW has observed that Russian forces are continuing to prepare fallback positions on the left (eastern) bank of the Dnipro River while continuing to set up defensive positions northwest of Kherson City and transporting additional mobilized forces there, despite Stremousov's statement.<sup>[2]</sup> Some Russian elite units — such as airborne forces and naval infantry — are reportedly continuing to operate on the right (western) bank of the Dnipro River and their full withdrawal from northern Kherson Oblast would be a clearer indicator that Russian forces will not fight for Kherson City or settlements on the right bank.<sup>[3]</sup> Stremousov also hypothesized about the probability of fighting in Kherson City and northern Kherson Oblast in the next two weeks, which may suggest that he anticipates some battles for Kherson City despite his comments about withdrawal.<sup>[4]</sup> Stremousov is also an unreliable source who has consistently issued contradictory statements and made emotional responses to events, and his public statements may be clouded by personal fears of losing his position within the occupation government.

Ukrainian and Russian sources also extensively discussed the reported closure of some Russian checkpoints in the vicinity of Kherson City, the theft of city's monuments, and the removal of a Russian flag from the Kherson Oblast Administration building as indicators of an ongoing Russian withdrawal from the city.<sup>[5]</sup> A Russian outlet claimed that Russian officials removed the flag because the occupation administration moved to Henichesk by the Crimean border.<sup>[6]</sup> While the relocation of the Kherson Oblast occupation government may suggest that Russian forces are preparing to abandon Kherson City, it may equally indicate that they are setting conditions for urban combat within the city. Similar reports may arise in coming days given the ongoing forced evacuation of civilians from both right and left banks of the Dnipro River but may not indicate an immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from Kherson City. The disposition of Russian airborne forces remains the best indicator of Russian intentions.

**Russian forces prematurely impaled an insufficient concentration of mobilized personnel on offensive pushes near Bakhmut and Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast, wasting the fresh supply of mobilized personnel on marginal gains towards operationally insignificant settlements.**

Ukrainian General Staff Deputy Chief Oleksiy Hromov stated on November 3 that one or two Russian motorized rifle companies with artillery and tank support conducted ground attacks within the past week to seize Pavlivka in an effort to reach Vuhledar, but that Russian forces have suffered losses due to Ukrainian defenses.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian sources also acknowledged on November 3 that the rate of Russian advances near Vuhledar is slow due to Ukrainian resistance and mud.<sup>[8]</sup> Hromov stated that Russian forces continue ground attacks at the expense of mobilized personnel, private military company forces, and former prisoners, and that the Russians conducted over 40 ground attacks in the Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and western Donetsk Oblast areas in the past 24 hours, sustaining over 300 casualties (100 killed) in just one direction.<sup>[9]</sup> ISW has previously reported on the slow Russian rate of advance in Donetsk Oblast and injudicious allocation of resources on the front lines.<sup>[10]</sup> Russian forces would likely have had more success in such offensive operations if they had waited until enough mobilized personnel had arrived to amass a force large enough to overcome Ukrainian defenses despite poor weather conditions. Russian attacks continuing current patterns are unlikely to generate enough momentum to regain the battlefield initiative. ISW offers no hypothesis to explain Russian forces' impatience or their continued allocation of limited military assets to gaining operationally insignificant ground in Donetsk Oblast rather than defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensives in Luhansk and Kherson oblasts.

**Russian outlets continued to publish confused reports regarding the dismissal and replacement of Colonel General Alexander Lapin from either his role as the commander of the Central Military District (CMD) or as the commander of the Russian "central" forces in Ukraine.** The CMD press service told Kremlin-affiliated outlet *Kommersant* that the head of the organizational and mobilization department of the CMD, Major General Alexander Linkov, will temporarily replace Lapin as the CMD commander.<sup>[11]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not officially announced Lapin's dismissal or replacement, and the CMD did not specify if Linkov will also take charge of the "central" forces in Ukraine. Unnamed Russian MoD sources had previously told other Kremlin-affiliated outlets that Commander of the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant-General Andrey Mordvichev would command "central" forces while Lapin is on a three-week medical leave.<sup>[12]</sup> Milbloggers with ties to the Russian state media also recently claimed that Mordvichev will also command the CMD.<sup>[13]</sup> Such incoherent announcements by Russian MoD officials about the possible replacement of the second most-senior Russian commander in Ukraine is highly unusual for a professional military during a critical period of a war.

**Russian authorities may be setting conditions to imminently transfer the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to the Russian power grid following the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) November 3 statements affirming that Ukrainian authorities are not misusing nuclear materials.**<sup>[14]</sup> The IAEA also stated on November 3 that shelling damaged external powerlines to the ZNPP in Ukrainian-held territory at points 50-60km away from the plant, completely cutting power to the ZNPP just one day after Ukrainian authorities transferred two reactors to a hot shutdown mode to generate heat for Enerhodar.<sup>[15]</sup> This timing suggests that Russian authorities seek to force the transfer of the ZNPP to the Russian power grid by painting Russian control as the only viable option to provide electricity to the ZNPP and heat to Enerhodar and the surrounding area. The IAEA stated that backup generators are powering the ZNPP and have enough fuel for 15 days; Russian occupation authorities may transfer the ZNPP to the Russian power grid within this 15-day timeline.<sup>[16]</sup> Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev claimed on November 3 that Russian authorities prevented a Ukrainian "terrorist attack" at the ZNPP, further suggesting that Russian authorities intend to paint themselves as the only safe operator of the ZNPP contrary to the IAEA's findings of no indications of undeclared Ukrainian nuclear activities.<sup>[17]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- It is still unclear whether Russian forces will defend Kherson City despite the ongoing withdrawal of some Russian elements from northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces prematurely deployed newly mobilized personnel to offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast in the pursuit of minimal and operationally insignificant territorial gains.
- Russian outlets continued to publish contradictory and confusing reports about the dismissal of Colonel General Alexander Lapin from the position of CMD commander or commander of the Russian "central" forces.
- Russian authorities may be setting conditions to imminently transfer the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to the Russian power grid.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kremenna and Svatove.

- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.
- The Russian military continues to face pronounced issues in the supply of critical military equipment.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense is likely continuing mobilization efforts covertly.
- Russian occupation officials continued forced evacuations in Kherson Oblast.



#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 2, 8:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian force generation efforts combined with Western sanctions are having long-term damaging effects on the Russian economy, as ISW has previously forecasted. Financial experts told *Reuters* that the Kremlin will face a budget deficit that will "drain Moscow's reserves to their lowest level in years" due to projected decreases in energy revenue, sanctions, and the cost of Russian mobilization.<sup>[1]</sup> One expert predicted that payouts to mobilized men including social benefits may cost the Kremlin between 900 billion rubles and three trillion rubles (around \$14.6-\$32.4 billion) in the next six months. The number does not account for payouts to other categories of servicemen within the Russian forces such as BARS (Combat Army Reserve), volunteer battalions, and the long-term commitment to veterans' payments to contract servicemen, volunteers, non-military specialists who moved to occupied territories, and proxy fighters.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW previously estimated that one volunteer battalion of 400 servicemen costs Russia at least \$1.2 million per month excluding enlistment bonuses and special payments for military achievements.<sup>[3]</sup>

**The Kremlin is continuing to rely heavily on financially incentivizing Russians to fight in Ukraine, which will likely continue to strain the Russian economy for decades.** Russian officials have been promising salaries to volunteers and mobilized men that are more than twice the average Russian civilian salary before and during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>[4]</sup> The Kremlin has been attempting to deflect part of the cost of the force generation effort onto Russian federal subjects but will likely need to tap into the federal budget more heavily soon. United Russia Party Secretary Andrey Turchak, for example, stated that Russian servicemen from all regions must receive uniform benefits and noted that the federal government must cover the difference if the federal subject is unable to fully compensate all participants of the "special military operation."<sup>[5]</sup> Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin even acknowledged that there are insufficient measures in place to support mobilized personnel and their families in occupied Donetsk Oblast during a United Russia meeting.<sup>[6]</sup>

**The Kremlin is already facing challenges in delivering promised compensation, challenges that are increasing social tensions within Russian society.** Russian Telegram channels released footage of mobilized men in Ulyanovsk protesting payment issues.<sup>[7]</sup> Other footage from the Chuvashia Republic shows a presumably Russian local official yelling at protesting mobilized men that she had not promised them a payment of 300,000 rubles (about \$4,860).<sup>[8]</sup> Families of mobilized men publicly complained to Voronezh Oblast Governor Alexander Guseyev that they have not received promised compensation of 120,000 rubles (about \$1,945).<sup>[9]</sup> The Kremlin will need to continue to pay what it has promised to maintain societal control and some resemblance of morale among Russia's ad hoc collection of forces. ISW has also reported that the Kremlin is igniting conflict within Russian military formations amalgamated from different sources by offering different payments, benefits, and treatment.<sup>[10]</sup> Social media footage from October 31, for example, showed a physical fight between contract servicemen and mobilized men reportedly over personal belongings and military equipment.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's calls for a competitive Russian military industry are divorced from the reality of Russian supply chain and defense industrial base issues.** Putin stressed on November 2 during a meeting of the Coordinating Council for the Russian Armed Forces that it is important that the Russian government ensures active competition between Russian military arms manufacturers.<sup>[12]</sup> Putin's calls contrast with recent reporting that Russia has purchased weapons systems from Iran and North Korea to support its war effort in Ukraine.<sup>[13]</sup> US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby announced on November 2 that the American intelligence community believes that North Korea is covertly supplying Russia with artillery shells.<sup>[14]</sup> ISW previously reported that Iranian shipments of drones and possible ballistic missiles to Russia will likely further increase Russian reliance on Iranian-made weapons systems.<sup>[15]</sup> Russia has likely negotiated the weapon shipments with Iran and North Korea because it has significantly depleted its stock of munitions in air, missile, and artillery strikes over the course of the war in Ukraine and cannot readily restock them. Russia's reliance on isolated and heavily sanctioned states for critical weapons systems does not support Putin's demand that the Russian military industry becomes highly competitive and meet the needs of the Russian Armed Forces in any short period of time.

**Russian officials announced that occupation authorities began integrating the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) into the jurisdiction of Russian nuclear power plant operator Rosenergoatom on November 2.**<sup>[16]</sup> Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko claimed that ZNPP personnel who are "critical for the work of the ZNPP" signed contracts with Rosenergoatom and that Russian authorities are exploring the creation of a security zone around the ZNPP.<sup>[17]</sup> Ukraine's Energoatom stated on October 28 that only 100 of the 6,700 Ukrainian personnel remaining at the ZNPP plant have signed new contracts with Russian energy agency Rosatom (out of 11,000 personnel before February 24).<sup>[18]</sup> The Ukrainian State Inspectorate of Nuclear Regulation stated that Russian forces built an unknown structure at one of seven spent nuclear fuel storage sites at the ZNPP in violation of nuclear safety standards.<sup>[19]</sup> As of this publication, the IAEA has not issued a statement condemning the formally announced illegal Russian takeover of the operation of the ZNPP or addressed the likelihood that Russia will demand formal IAEA recognition of Russian control over the ZNPP and thereby de facto recognition of the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory.

**Russian and Belarusian officials continue to highlight bilateral defense cooperation between Russia and Belarus as a means of perpetuating the long-standing information operation that Belarus will enter the war in Ukraine on behalf of Russia. Belarus' entry into the war remains highly unlikely, as ISW has previously assessed.** Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced on November 2 that Russia and Belarus held the annual meeting of the Joint Board of the Ministries of Defense with the purpose of strengthening the "joint military potential" of the Russia-Belarus Union State to counter "challenges and threats of a military nature" posed by NATO.<sup>[20]</sup> Khrenin's statement is likely meant to signal continued Belarusian loyalty to Russia and present

an image of Belarusian-Russian military unity to the West. As ISW has previously assessed, the likelihood of a Belarusian invasion of the war remains highly unlikely due to the array of domestic ramifications such an action would have on President Alexander Lukashenko's regime, as well as limited Belarusian military capabilities.[21] The meeting of the Joint Board of the Ministries of Defense is therefore a continuation of a concerted effort on the part of both Belarus and Russia to perpetuate an information operation that presents the threat of the Union State as imminent in order to pin Ukrainian troops against the northern border and pollute the information space.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian force generation efforts combined with Western sanctions are having long-term damaging effects on the Russian economy, as ISW has previously forecasted.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's calls for a competitive Russian military industry are divorced from the reality of Russian supply chain and defense industrial base issues.
- Russian officials announced that occupation authorities began integrating the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) into Russian jurisdiction.
- Russian and Belarusian officials continue to perpetuate the long-standing information operation that Belarus will enter the war in Ukraine on behalf of Russia, but Belarus' entry into the war remains highly unlikely, as ISW has previously assessed.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in the directions of Svatove and Kremenna, and Russian forces conducted offensive operations to constrain Ukrainian forces.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations along the Dnipro River while Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground assaults near Bakhmut and Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued mobilization efforts and advertising for volunteer battalions while struggling with low morale.
- Russian occupation authorities continued to forcibly relocate Kherson Oblast residents, nationalize Ukrainian enterprises in occupied territory, and forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 1

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 1, 8:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Iran plans to send more combat drones and new ballistic missile systems to Russia for use in Ukraine, likely further strengthening Russia's reliance on Iranian-made weapon systems. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 1 that Iranian officials intend to send a shipment of more than 200 Shahed-136, Mohajer-6, and Arash-2 combat drones to Russia.[1] The GUR reported that Iran will send Russia the drones in a disassembled state and that Russian personnel will assemble them with Russian markings.[2] CNN reported on November 1 that unnamed officials from a western country that closely monitors Iranian weapons programs stated that Iran plans to send a thousand weapons to Russia by the end of the year, including surface-to-surface short-range ballistic missiles and combat drones.[3] This would be the first confirmed instance of Iran sending Russia advanced precision-guided missiles. Russia likely negotiated the additional Iranian shipment of weapons systems due to the depletion of its stockpile of cruise missile and drone systems over the course of the war in Ukraine, particularly during the Russian campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure. The GUR reported that Ukrainian air defenses have shot down more than 300 Shahed-136 drones since Russia started using them in Ukraine on September 13.[4] Russia will likely continue to use drone attacks and missile strikes against critical infrastructure to try to offset the failures and limitations of its conventional forces on the frontline. Russian dependence on Iranian-made systems, and therefore on Iran, will likely increase.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) started its semi-annual fall conscription drive on November 1, amidst reports of continuing covert mobilization throughout the country. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that 2,700 draft committees across 85 federal subjects

began the fall conscription call-up of 120,000 men.[5] Shoigu also stated that partial mobilization in Russia concluded. Head of the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the Russian General Staff, Yevgeniy Burdinsky, reiterated that Russia is conscripting 7,500 fewer men than in previous years and noted that partial mobilization postponed the conscription cycle by one month. [6] Burdinsky claimed that conscripts will not serve in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, or Zaporizhia oblasts this year and will not participate in combat. Head of the 4th Directorate of the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the Russian General Staff Vladimir Tsimlyansky added that most recruits will deploy to training formations and military units where they will train for five months, while others will receive specializations based on their skills and education level.[7] The Russian MoD has conducted semi-annual conscription call-ups for decades and should be able to execute this process effectively and efficiently. Any problems with the execution of the fall call-up would likely indicate that partial mobilization and the war in Ukraine have complicated a standard procedure.

Numerous Russian sources reported that Russian enlistment officers are continuing to mobilize men despite Shoigu's previous announcements of the conclusion of partial mobilization and transition into the conscription period on October 28. Local Russian outlets reported instances of men receiving mobilization notices in Tyumen and St. Petersburg as of October 31.[8] The Russian Central Military District (CMD) reportedly told journalists of a Russian outlet that mobilization processes will continue across Russia until Russian President Vladimir Putin signs a decree ending the mobilization period. [9] Ukrainian Melitopol and Mariupol authorities also reported that Russian occupation authorities are continuing to coerce Ukrainians into volunteer battalions and territorial defense units.[10]

**Commander of the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant-General Andrey Mordvichev reportedly replaced Colonel-General Alexander Lapin as commander of the Central Military District (CMD).** Several Russian milbloggers—including some who appear on Russian state television—noted that Mordichev has replaced Lapin in this position, but the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not officially announced Mordichev's appointment nor Lapin's dismissal as of November 1.[11] A Russian local outlet citing an unnamed official within the Russian MoD claimed that Mordichev will only replace Lapin as the commander of the "center" forces in Ukraine for the duration of Lapin's supposed three-week medical leave.[12] A milblogger who frequently appears on Russian state media claimed that the Commander of the Russian Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin, personally appointed Mordichev to replace Lapin due to his commitment to objective frontline reporting.[13] If reports of Mordichev's appointment are true, then the Kremlin may be attempting to appease the pro-war milblogger community that has been demanding transparency and more honest reporting. The milblogger added that Mordichev reportedly has "warm working relations" with Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and that Kadyrov called Mordichev "the best commander" during their meeting in mid-March.[14] Mordichev's appointment may therefore indicate that the Kremlin is attempting to appease the *siloviki* faction—composed of Kadyrov and Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin—that has publicly criticized Lapin as well.[15] Lapin's dismissal may have also been Surovikin's recommendation as well, however, given that both commanders operated in the Luhansk Oblast area to seize Lysychansk and its surroundings in June. [16] ISW cannot independently verify milblogger or Russian local outlet reports at this time.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is likely attempting to address critiques against his parallel military structures following Lapin's reported dismissal.** Prigozhin defended his mercenaries against unspecified "tens of thousands of critics," stating that his Wagner mercenaries are dying while critics are refusing to go to the frontlines.[17] Prigozhin has been responding to numerous inquiries in recent days regarding Wagner units suffering losses or facing outbreaks of infectious diseases among prisoner recruits, but his attacks against Lapin have prompted some within the pro-war community to publicly question his authority.[18] Many Russian milbloggers who had defended Lapin heavily criticized Prigozhin's comments about the Russian higher military command, with one milblogger stating that "shepherds and cooks," sarcastically referring to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Prigozhin, could not assess Lapin's performance.[19] ISW has also previously noted that Prigozhin's units have not made significant gains around Bakhmut since June.[20]

Prigozhin is likely attempting to reduce the appearance that he might become too powerful, stating that he has no plans to hold political office and would refuse such a position if offered.[21] Prigozhin also added that he does not consider himself to be a leader of public opinion and does not engage in "showdowns" with Russian officials, despite continuing to publicly attack St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov and repeatedly calling for his resignation.[22] Prigozhin added that he is not competing with Beglov in the St-Petersburg business sphere.

#### Key Takeaways

- Planned Iranian shipments of drones and ballistic missiles to Russia will likely further strengthen Russian reliance on Iran and Iranian-made weapons systems.
- The Russian MoD started its semi-annual fall conscription cycle despite reports of Russian authorities covertly continuing mobilization measures.
- Commander of the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD), Lieutenant-General Andrey Mordvichev, reportedly replaced Colonel-General Alexander Lapin as commander of the Central Military District (CMD).
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is likely attempting to address critiques against his parallel military structures following Lapin's reported dismissal.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in the directions of Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued defensive preparations while Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations around Bakhmut and around Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued to strengthen Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian military structures are reportedly expanding training capabilities.
- Russian occupation officials continued to set conditions for the long-term and permanent relocation of residents from the east bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.

### **Interactive Map and Assessment: Verified Ukrainian Partisan Attacks against Russian Occupation Forces**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Date: November 1, 2022

George Barros and Noel Mikkelsen

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of verified Ukrainian Partisan Attacks. ISW will update this map as we confirm more attacks.

**Key Takeaway:** Effective Ukrainian partisan attacks are forcing the Kremlin to divert resources away from frontline operations to help secure rear areas, degrading Russia's ability to defend against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives, let alone conduct their own offensive operations. Poor Russian operational security has enabled Ukrainian partisan attacks. Russia's increasing manpower shortages are likely degrading Russian forces' ability to effectively secure Russian rear areas against partisan attacks and simultaneously defend against Ukrainian counteroffensives. The Kremlin still has not effectively countered Ukraine's organized partisan movement and is unlikely to have the capabilities to do so.

*Note on methodology: This curated list of confirmed Ukrainian partisan attacks contains only events that ISW can verify with high confidence using visual evidence, remotely sensed data, or Russian and Ukrainian source corroboration. This list only includes events that official Ukrainian government entities have claimed or discussed. ISW has observed several reported partisan attacks that have not met this high-confidence threshold. This dataset is likely a small subset of all actual Ukrainian partisan attacks. This list does not include Ukrainian partisan reconnaissance or fire adjustment tasks. This list does not jeopardize Ukrainian operational security as Russian and Ukrainian government sources have discussed them publicly.*

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 31**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 31, 9:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted another massive wave of missiles strikes targeting critical Ukrainian infrastructure across the country on October 31, likely in an attempt to degrade Ukraine's will to fight as temperatures drop.** Russian forces fired over 50 Kh-101 and Kh-555 missiles from the northern Caspian Sea and the Volgodonsk region of Rostov Oblast, targeting critical Ukrainian energy infrastructure.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 44 out of over 50 Russian missiles.[2] Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal reported that the strikes damaged 18 mostly energy-related targets across 10 Ukrainian regions.[3] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian strikes cut off water to 80% of Kyiv residents on October 31 and left hundreds of thousands without power.[4]

**Russian occupation officials once again shifted their rhetoric regarding the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) and are likely setting information conditions to continue to drive evacuations from the west bank of the Dnipro River and provide rhetorical cover for a Russian withdrawal from the area.** Kherson Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo announced on October 31 that his administration is expanding the evacuation zone by 15km from the Dnipro River and cited information that Ukraine is preparing for a "massive missile attack" of the Kakhovka HPP dam, which Saldo alleged will cause massive flooding and destruction of civilian infrastructure. [5] Saldo previously claimed on October 26 that it would be "practically impossible" to destroy the dam and that even in case of a breach, the water level of the Dnipro River would only rise 2 meters.[6]

The apparent oscillation in Saldo's position on the Kakhovka HPP indicates that his administration is likely using threats of breach and flooding to perpetuate an information operation with a two-fold purpose: to drive evacuations from the west bank and to explain away a future Russian withdrawal from the west bank. These is no scenario in which it would be advantageous for Ukraine to blow the dam. The ramifications that such an action would have on the safety of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), which relies on the water in the Kakhovka reservoir for coolant, and the economic and social implications of flooding over 80 settlements and destroying civilian homes and viable land, entirely preclude the possibility that this is a contingency Ukraine may pursue. Blowing the dam would also make it much harder for Ukrainian forces to achieve their stated aims of liberating the remainder of Kherson Oblast and other territories east of the river. Saldo's statements are likely therefore meant to encourage residents of the west bank to promptly evacuate and may also establish informational cover for a Russian withdrawal from the west bank. Saldo could be framing the dam explosion as an inevitable and insurmountable obstacle that Russian forces could only avoid by abandoning the west bank and retreating further into Kherson Oblast. Russia's ability or willingness to physically damage the dam is relatively immaterial—the informational effects of accusing Ukraine of preparing to blow the dam could be sufficient to create rhetorical cover to explain away any future Russian withdrawals.

**Russian forces are likely continuing to move troops and military assets across the Dnipro River in anticipation of Ukrainian advances towards Kherson City.** Ukrainian military sources reported on October 30 that Russian forces are preparing to move artillery units and weapons from the west bank of the Dnipro River for possible redeployment in other directions.[7] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command additionally noted on October 31 that Russian forces are preparing to evacuate individual units and military equipment from the west bank and have collected watercraft to facilitate the evacuation.[8] Russian-backed Kherson occupation deputy Kirill Stremousov stated that on October 30 Russian forces also began engineering positions in Bilozerka (6km due west of Kherson City) and Chornobaivka (1km north of Kherson City), which is corroborated by imagery posted by reported Russian collaborators of barbed wire defenses in these areas.[9] The fact that Russian collaborators are preparing to defend Chornobaivka is particularly noteworthy, as Chornobaivka is the last settlement along the M14 north of Kherson City. The current frontline lies less than 20km northwest of Chornobaivka, and active efforts to bolster defense here indicate concern for an imminent Ukrainian advance. The simultaneous evacuation of military assets from the west bank and preparations for the defense of critical areas around Kherson City indicate serious anxiety over Russian control of the west bank.

**Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued his efforts to increase his status among Russian elites and his presence in St. Petersburg by attacking local officials and announcing the creation of a PMC Wagner Center in St. Petersburg on October 31.** Prigozhin reportedly requested on October 31 that the Russian Prosecutor General's office open a criminal investigation into the "fact" that St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov organized a "criminal community" in St. Petersburg.[10] Prigozhin alleged that Beglov's criminal network intends to plunder the state budget and enrich corrupt officials. Prigozhin is likely using his criticism of Beglov and other St. Petersburg politicians to enhance his own reputation—and his campaign may be working. The publication *Petersburg Vestnik* characterized Prigozhin's popularity as "skyrocketing" on October 31 and asked if he had any plans to form a party or go into politics, to which Prigozhin replied "I do not

strive for popularity. My task is to fulfill my duty to the Motherland, and today I do not plan to create any parties, let alone go into politics.”[11]

Prigozhin may or may not create his own political party, but he is establishing himself as a political force, using his popular status and his affiliation with Wagner to critique his opponents within elite circles and to institutionalize his own authority. Prigozhin criticized Russian “oligarchs” and “elites” on October 31 for living in a “state of comfort” and preventing the full mobilization of Russian society: “until [elites’] children go to war, the full mobilization of the country will not happen.”[12] Prigozhin also announced the creation of a “PMC Wagner Center” in St. Petersburg on October 31, which he said is scheduled to open on November 4.[13] Prigozhin described the center as “a complex of buildings in which there are places for free accommodation of inventors, designers, IT specialists, experimental production, and start-up spaces” with the intention of creating a “comfortable environment for generating new ideas in order to increase the defense capability of Russia, including information.” Prigozhin noted that he did not inform the local St. Petersburg administration of the center’s creation because the local government is not a “sufficiently representative structure to interfere with the work of the PMC Wagner Center.” Prigozhin challenged local government officials who have problems with his center to take them up in court and suggested that he will establish new branches if the St. Petersburg branch is successful. Private military companies like Wagner are illegal per the Russian constitution. [14]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces launched another massive wave of strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure, further damaging the power grid and leaving much of Kyiv without water.
- Russian officials again changed their minds about the risk of Ukrainian forces destroying the Kakhovka dam, ordering evacuations of areas that could be flooded. There is no scenario in which Ukraine would benefit from destroying the dam, and this rhetoric is likely meant to speed evacuations and provide informational cover for Russian withdrawals from the west bank.
- Russian forces are continuing to withdraw from the west bank of the Dnipro River even as they set conditions to fight for positions around Kherson City.
- Wagner Private Military Company financier Evgeniy Prigozhin sought to bring charges against the St. Petersburg mayor for corruption and announced the imminent opening of the PMC Wagner Center in St. Petersburg. Prigozhin also attacked “oligarchs” and “elites” for living in comfort and preventing the full mobilization of Russia.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian troops conducted counter-offensive operations in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast and along the Svatove-Kremenna line on October 30 and 31.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces continued counter-offensive operations in Kherson Oblast on October 30 and 31.
- The Ukrainian interdiction campaign is reportedly damaging Russian forces exfiltrating across the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut on October 30 and 31.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian troops made incremental gains in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on October 30 and 31, but ISW cannot verify these claims.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely attempting to prevent draft dodging by trying to deceive the Russian population into believing that autumn conscripts will not be sent to fight in Ukraine.
- The MoD also announced the end of partial mobilization on October 31, executing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s order to end mobilization by the end of October
- Local Russian governments remain responsible for even basic provisions to mobilized personnel, demonstrating the inefficiency of crowdfunding efforts and uncoordinated supply lines to support a modern military.
- Russian occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast announced that they would allow the use of Ukrainian hryvnias alongside Russian rubles, demonstrating the failure of their monthslong rubleization efforts in Kherson.
- Russian officials continue to create poor conditions in occupied parts of Kherson Oblast, likely to drive local inhabitants to evacuate.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 31, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE CAMPAIGN ASSESSMENT, OCTOBER 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan

October 30, 5:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, October 30. This report forecasts that Russia will continue to conduct conventional military operations well into 2023 rather than escalating to the use of tactical nuclear weapons or scaling back its objectives in pursuit of some off-ramp. It considers the timelines of Russian force generation and deployment, of weather effects, and of Moscow's efforts to freeze Europe into surrender. It includes a summary of battlefield activities that will be described in more detail in tomorrow's update.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will most likely try to continue conventional military operations in Ukraine to hold currently occupied territories, gain new ground, and set conditions for the collapse of Western support for Ukraine that he likely expects to occur this winter. Putin has likely not abandoned hopes of achieving his maximalist aims in Ukraine through conventional military means, which he is pursuing in parallel with efforts to break Ukraine's will to fight and the West's will to continue supporting Kyiv.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin is unlikely to escalate to the use of tactical nuclear weapons barring the sudden collapse of the Russian military permitting Ukrainian forces to make uncontrolled advances throughout the theater.<sup>[2]</sup> Such a situation is possible but unlikely. Putin is extraordinarily unlikely to seek direct military conflict with NATO. Putin is very likely to continue to hint at the possibility of Russian tactical nuclear use and attacks on NATO, however, as parts of his effort to break Western will to continue supporting Ukraine.

**This forecast rests on two assessments. First, that Putin is setting conditions to continue throwing poorly prepared Russian troops directly into the fighting in Ukraine for the foreseeable future rather than pausing operations to reconstitute effective military forces. Second, that Putin's theory of victory relies on using the harsh winter to break Europe's will.** These assessments offer a series of timelines that support the forecast.

**Russian force-generation efforts will occur over the course of several predictable time periods.** Putin has declared that the “partial mobilization” of reservists is complete.<sup>[3]</sup> That declaration means that, in principle, the Russian military will stop calling up reservists and instead focus on completing their brief training periods before sending them to fight in Ukraine. ISW previously assessed that most of the remaining called-up reservists will arrive in the theater of war over the next few weeks.<sup>[4]</sup>

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that continued reserve mobilization efforts will take the form of renewed efforts to recruit “volunteers,” likely into volunteer battalions—efforts that were largely shelved during the “partial mobilization.”<sup>[5]</sup> Russia will likely struggle to fill out new “volunteer” units rapidly following the reserve call-ups and the flight of hundreds of thousands of Russians who feared those call-ups. Continued attempts to create “volunteer” units will thus likely generate little meaningful combat power and will be spread over an extended period of time.

The Russian military will begin its semi-annual conscription call-up a month later than usual on November 1, 2022. Russia’s conscription cycle offers a set of predictable timelines. Normal Russian conscript training involves a period of roughly six months of individual basic and advanced training followed by the assignment of conscripts to combat units in which they complete their remaining six months of mandatory service.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian law bans sending conscripts to combat operations abroad with fewer than four months of training, although it specifies that conditions of war or martial law allow the Russian military to deploy conscripts to fight earlier than that. Putin has declared martial law states of varying degrees of urgency throughout the Russian Federation and could use that declaration to trigger the exemption from the mandatory training period.<sup>[7]</sup> The annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts offers another possible basis for exemption, because Russian law does not preclude the use of conscripts in Russian territory regardless of how much training they have received.<sup>[8]</sup>

Raw conscripts with no military experience and fewer than four months of training are likely to be nearly useless on the battlefield in any case. Putin may rush limited numbers of such conscripts to combat before their four-month training period is complete, but most will likely be held back until March 2023 at the earliest.

The Russian military will likely find it necessary to send these conscripts to units in Ukraine at the end of their six-month period of initial training in any case, however, as there are unlikely to be enough functional combat units at home stations in Russia to receive them. The Russian military has fully committed its available ground forces units to Ukraine in a series of force-generation efforts, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[9]</sup> The partial mobilization and volunteer battalion recruitment efforts are further evidence that the Russian military has no remaining uncommitted ground forces to send. The Russian military likely will be unable to keep called-up conscripts in training areas for more than six months, however, because the next semi-annual conscription call-up would normally begin around April 1, 2023. Conscripts called up beginning on November 1, 2022, will thus likely be assigned to combat and support units in Ukraine and begin to arrive on the battlefield around May 2023.

The Russian Defense Ministry will not likely be able to conduct additional reserve call-ups as long as it is engaged in providing conscripts with initial training. The next window for a large-scale reserve mobilization would thus likely be not earlier than March 1.

The combination of the just-completed partial reserve mobilization and the annual conscription cycle thus creates two likely waves of Russian troops flowing into Ukraine—one moving in over the next few weeks, and the other starting to flow in spring 2023.

**Weather offers another likely periodization of Russian efforts that coincides well with the force-generation timelines discussed above.** Fall in Ukraine is generally wet and muddy but not usually so bad as to make mechanized offensives impossible. Winter, on the other hand, is usually the best season for mechanized warfare in Ukraine. Ukrainian land is among the most fertile on earth in part because of the dense network of rivers and streams that irrigate it. That network also breaks up the land and can inhibit mechanized advances by canalizing them along roads (although both Russian and Ukrainian troops are, in principle, trained and equipped to operate on this terrain in any season, Ukrainian troops have been far more successful, in general, in doing so.) When the ground freezes hard, however, most of the streams and some of the rivers also freeze, greatly facilitating cross-country mechanized advances. Spring is the nightmare season for fighting in Ukraine. The thaw swells

rivers and streams and turns fields into seas of mud. Mechanized warfare in the spring muddy season is extremely difficult (although, again, not impossible for forces like Ukraine's and, theoretically, Russia's, that are properly equipped and trained for it).

The Russian partial mobilization is thus flowing forces into Ukraine now in a way that is likely meant to stiffen Russian defenses and allow Russian forces to hold their positions against expected Ukrainian counter-offensive operations through the rest of the fall and into the dangerous winter period. If Putin intends to deploy Russian boys about to be conscripted after four or six months of training, he could be setting conditions for Russian forces to resume offensive operations after the end of the spring thaw.

**The Russian partial mobilization of reservists just completed strongly suggests that Putin intends to keep fighting into 2023 rather than expecting to secure some sort of ceasefire or to escalate in a way that could end the war on his terms.** He has paid a very high domestic price for this mobilization effort in the flight of hundreds of thousands of Russians to other countries, unprecedented protests, and equally unprecedented criticisms of the performance of the Russian military and the Russian government.<sup>[10]</sup> This price makes sense if Putin intends to keep fighting and recognizes the need to get reinforcements to Ukraine right now in order to hold his positions long enough for fresh conscripts to arrive and turn the tide in his favor, as he might think. It makes far less sense if he intends to escalate to the use of tactical nuclear weapons either in an effort to win the war or in hopes of securing a ceasefire or some other off-ramp on favorable terms. It could make sense as part of a non-escalatory effort to pursue negotiations for some off-ramp had Putin not accompanied his announcement of the end of partial mobilization with repetitions of his maximalist claims regarding the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian state and the artificiality of the Ukrainian ethos that are incompatible with serious negotiations.

**Putin's efforts to break Europe's will by withholding Russian energy supplies over the winter offers yet another timeline that coheres well with the others.** The theory underlying this Russian effort would be that freezing European populations will put such pressure on their governments that European states will begin to accept Putin's demands to stop providing weapons and other forms of support to Ukraine, at least, and possibly to lift various sanctions on Russia as well. This theory will not really be falsifiable until well into 2023, however. European governments have ostentatiously prepared their populations for a difficult winter, stocked up as best they can on energy supplies, and set conditions to reduce energy usage even at significant economic cost. These actions signal that European leaders are ready for the kinds of pressures they are likely to encounter early in the cold season. Putin can hope that they will not be able to withstand those pressures all through the winter, but the validity of that hope will not be clear until the coldest weather has had a chance to build them. This timeline thus also coincides with the likely availability of the next wave of Russian forces in spring 2023—Putin will have been able to observe the effect of winter on European will and choose whether to commit his conscripts or pursue some other course of action.

**These timelines are likely more significant in shaping Putin's thoughts and decisions than in shaping effects on the ground.** Roughly one-third of the mobilized reservists have already arrived in Ukraine, according to Putin, and they have made relatively little difference on the battlefield.<sup>[11]</sup> The UK Ministry of Defense noted that they are reinforcing combat units that were in some cases effectively destroyed—reduced to 10 percent of their normal complements.<sup>[12]</sup> The arrival of hastily mobilized and untrained reservists into such units will not render them combat effective. The deployment of raw conscripts after four or six months of training in 2023 will likely have similarly nugatory effects on the battlefield. But Putin does not appear to recognize these facts and seems rather to expect the reserves called up at such surprising cost to make a real difference.

**Putin is thus setting conditions to continue waging conventional war for the foreseeable future rather than preparing to try to end the war by escalation or by making for some “off-ramp.”** He could always change his mind, to be sure. But Ukraine and the West should be operating on the assumption that Ukraine will continue to have many months in which to regain control of strategically vital terrain, for which it will also continue to require continued large-scale Western support.

**On the battlefield, Ukrainian forces conducted further offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine, and Russian forces continued to set conditions for a withdrawal from Kherson. Those developments are summarized briefly and will be covered in more detail tomorrow.**

**Key inflections in ongoing military operations on October 30:**

- Unconfirmed Russian reports claimed that Russian Lieutenant General Andrey Mordvichev (Commander of the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District) replaced

Colonel General Alexander Lapin as Central Military District (CMD) commander as of October 30.[13] Russian sources continue to make contradictory reports about whether Lapin was fully relieved of command of the CMD or just relieved of command of the Russian operational “Central Group of Forces” operating in Ukraine.[14]

- The Russian Ministry of Defense and Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian assaults on Pershotravneve, Tabaivka, and Berestove in Kharkiv Oblast.[15]
- Ukrainian sources and geolocated reports indicate that Russian forces destroyed a bridge over the Krasna River in Krasnorichenske, Luhansk Oblast.[16] Russian milbloggers accused Ukrainian forces of destroying the bridge.[17]
- A Russian occupation official stated that Russian force are preparing to defend Kherson City by engineering defenses in Bilozerka and Chornobaivka.[18] Ukrainian military official also noted that Russian officials continued to prepare defenses around Kherson City.[19]
- Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are preparing to withdraw artillery units from unspecified areas on the western bank of the Dnipro River to possibly reinforce other directions.[20] Ukrainian military officials also reported that several hundred Rosgvardia servicemen deployed from the Republic of Chechnya to Kalanchak in southwestern Kherson Oblast.[21]
- Russian forces continued to shell Ukrainian positions in Beryslav Raion, Kherson Oblast, and both Ukrainian and Russian sources provided limited information regarding the situation on the Kherson Oblast frontline.[22]
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces captured Vodyane, Donetsk Oblast, (4km northwest of Donetsk International Airport) on October 30.[23] The Ukrainian General Staff's evening report did not report repelling Russian attacks in this area as it usually does, potentially indicating that the Russian claims are accurate.
- Russian sources reported that Russian forces captured Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast, (2km southwest of Vuhledar) on October 30.[24] Some Russian sources claim that Russian forces control only half of Pavlivka as of October 30.[25] The Ukrainian General Staff's evening report did not report repelling Russian attacks in this area as it usually does, potentially indicating that the Russian claims are accurate.
- Russian forces launched Kh-59 cruise missiles at Ochakov, Mykolaiv Oblast.[26] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces targeted and destroyed military infrastructure in Ochakov.[27]
- Mobilized men from Republic of Komi appealed to Russian authorities with complaints of insufficient military equipment and body armor.[28]
- Russia announced its intention to supply 500,000 tons of grain to the “poorest countries” following its withdrawal from the deal that allowed Ukraine to export its grain. [29] Ukraine announced that it intends to export agricultural products to maintain global food security.[30]
- Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces continued to create conditions in Nova Kakhovka to drive local inhabitants to evacuate.[31]
- Occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast announced a dual currency system that allows the use of both rubles and hryvnya, unwinding a months-long effort to enforce rubleization in the oblast.[32]

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 30, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 29, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Likely Ukrainian forces conducted an attack against a Grigorovich-class frigate of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) near Sevastopol with unmanned surface vehicles on October 29. Social media footage documented an unknown number of unmanned surface vehicles striking at least one Grigorovich-class frigate in Sevastopol on October 29.<sup>[1]</sup> Footage also showed smoke near the port in Sevastopol and what appeared to be Russian air defense in Sevastopol engaging air targets.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces used seven autonomous maritime drones and nine unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct a “terrorist attack” against the BSF and civilian targets in Sevastopol.<sup>[3]</sup> Attacks on military vessels in wartime are legitimate acts of war and not terrorist attacks. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces destroyed all air targets, destroyed four maritime drones on the outer roadstead, and three maritime drones on the inner roadstead. A similar unidentified unmanned surface vehicle first appeared on the coast of Crimea on September 21.<sup>[4]</sup>

Damage to Black Sea Fleet vessels is unclear at this time. The Russian MoD claimed that the attack inflicted minor damage against BSF minesweeper *Ivan Golubets* and a protective barrier in the south bay.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian officials did not acknowledge any damage to a Grigorovich-class frigate, similar to how

the Russian MoD denied any damage to the cruiser *Moskva* when Ukrainian forces sunk it on April 14. Ukrainian officials have not claimed responsibility for the attack as of this publication.

The Russian Foreign Ministry announced that Russia indefinitely suspended its participation in the United Nations-brokered grain export deal with Ukraine due to the attack on October 29.<sup>[6]</sup> Russia had been setting rhetorical conditions to withdraw from the deal for some time, however.

The Black Sea Fleet has three Grigorovich-class frigates, all of which are capable of firing Kalibr cruise missiles. A Ukrainian decision to target Kalibr-capable frigate at this time makes sense given the intensified Russian drone and missile strike campaign targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure. If Kyiv ordered this attack, it would have been a proportionate, even restrained, response to the extensive Russian strategic bombing campaign attacking civilian targets throughout Ukraine over the past few weeks.

**The Kremlin reportedly relieved the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Alexander Lapin, of his position as the commander of the “central” group of forces in Ukraine.** The Kremlin has not officially confirmed Lapin’s relief as of October 29, prompting the rise of contradictory reports across Kremlin-sponsored outlets and Telegram channels. Kremlin-sponsored outlets cited reports from Chechnya-based TV channel “Grozny,” milbloggers, and other unnamed official sources that Lapin no longer commands Russian forces in northern Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[7]</sup> Some Russian milbloggers claimed that Lapin resigned on his own initiative, while others claimed that he was unfairly terminated.<sup>[8]</sup> A Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed that Lapin lost his position due to his devastating failure to deploy and organize mobilized men in his zone of responsibility, and ISW has previously reported on the poor treatment of untrained mobilized men on the Svatove-Kremenna frontline under Lapin’s command.<sup>[9]</sup>

It is unclear whether Lapin was also relieved of his command of the Central Military District. Some milbloggers implied that Lapin is no longer the CMD commander as well, however, there is no clear reporting or evidence.<sup>[10]</sup> Local Russian outlet *Ura* claimed that Lapin is taking a three-week-long medical leave citing an unnamed Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) source.<sup>[11]</sup>

**ISW cannot independently confirm the reports of Lapin’s dismissal, but the deluge of conflicting reports may indicate that the Kremlin is struggling to control the narrative regarding its higher military command.** The Kremlin had previously refrained from discussing command changes before the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in Lyman, after which Russian President Vladimir Putin formally replaced the commanders of the Western and Eastern Military Districts (WMD and EMD). Putin likely publicly reshuffled district commanders to use them as scapegoats for Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman.<sup>[12]</sup> The increasing transparency within the Russian information space—spearheaded by the *siloviki* Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and the pro-war community—is likely making it more challenging for the Kremlin to conceal and explain away any command changes in public. Kadyrov and Prigozhin both have publicly attacked Lapin on several occasions, leading some milbloggers to point out that other Russian district commanders did not receive any criticism despite their own failings (and firings).<sup>[13]</sup> The reports of Lapin’s dismissal, whether true or false, indicate that the Russian *siloviki* faction is gaining dominance in the information space that allows it to damage the image of the Russian higher military command that the MoD would likely prefer to present.

**Reports of Lapin’s dismissal further highlighted the fragmentation within the Russian pro-war community.** A milblogger who had defended Lapin stated that unspecified “lobbyists” had finally removed Lapin from his post acting in their own self-interest, going against the pro-Lapin group of milbloggers.<sup>[14]</sup> Kremlin-leading Russian outlets also emphasized that a group of milbloggers supported Lapin, indicating the ever-growing influence of milbloggers in the information space.<sup>[15]</sup> The milblogger added that he and other pro-Lapin milbloggers faced criticism accusing the milbloggers of being on Lapin’s payroll and producing propaganda in support of him. A pro-Wagner milblogger, in turn, stated that overwhelming cries in support of Lapin did not conceal his numerous military failures.<sup>[16]</sup> Milbloggers from both sides are effectively focusing on failures of Russian military command from either side of the argument, which further undermines the reputation of the Russian Armed Forces and the Kremlin.

**Russian pro-war milbloggers have recognized that Western-provided HIMARS halted Russian offensive operations in northwestern Kherson Oblast in July.** Some Russian milbloggers commented on satellite imagery of an empty Russian military base at the Kherson International Airport Chornobaivka (northwest of Kherson City) obtained from the private US company Satellogic. The milbloggers noted that Russian forces withdrew their “contingent,” military equipment, and aviation from Chornobaivka between May and September in an effort to protect their equipment against Ukrainian strikes on the base.<sup>[17]</sup> One milblogger noted that while Russian forces withdrew some

aviation elements from the base between May and June due to Ukrainian Tochka-U strikes, the introduction of HIMARS forced Russian command to establish a withdrawal plan from the base that concluded in September.[18] Another milblogger noted that the satellite images further confirmed that the situation on the northwestern Kherson Oblast frontline has not changed in two months and that withdrawn detachments did not return to their positions.[19] Previous satellite imagery from the August-September period showed at least 16 main battle tanks and armored personnel carriers at Chornobaivka, which indicates that the total Russian withdrawal from the Kherson International Airport is fairly recent.[20]

**Russia is likely expediting efforts to forcibly depopulate areas of Kherson Oblast along the Dnipro River and repopulate them with Russian soldiers, some out of uniform in violation of the law of armed conflict.** Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported on October 28 that Russian officials gave residents of Kherson City a two-day eviction notice and that Russian forces have introduced intensified inspection and verification checkpoints at roadblocks on the "evacuation" routes to Russian-occupied Crimea.[21] The Ukrainian General Staff also stated on October 29 that Russian forces are continuing to forcibly evacuate civilians from Nova Kakhovka and that in Beryslav, Russian soldiers are changing into civilian clothes and moving into private residences *en masse*.[22] International law considers the "simulation of civilian status" to constitute a resort to perfidy, which is a violation of the laws of armed conflict.[23] Russia may be using resort to perfidy tactics to depopulate areas of Kherson Oblast and repopulate them with soldiers in civilian dress in order to set conditions to accuse Ukraine of striking civilian targets when attacking Russian military positions.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely responding to pressure levied by milbloggers regarding its treatment of Russian prisoners of war (POWs) and the conduct of prisoner exchanges.** The Russian MoD announced on October 29 that Russia negotiated the release of 50 Russian prisoners of war but did not provide further details on the identities of the POWs or the terms of exchange. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin stated that seven of the POWs are DNR servicemen and that two are servicemen of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).[24] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that in exchange 52 Ukrainian POWS returned from Russia.[25] The Russian MoD's announcement of the exchange is particularly noteworthy in light of recent milblogger criticism of the Russian MoD's previous handling of POWs and POW exchanges. As ISW reported on September 22, the Russian MoD faced substantial criticism for a POW exchange wherein 215 Ukrainian soldiers, including commanders of the Azov Regiment, were released in exchange for 55 Russian soldiers and political prisoners.[26] Russian sources additionally previously complained that the Russian MoD has neglected to contact and adequately care for Russian POWs and demanded that Russian authorities do more to secure the safety of POWs.[27] The Russian MoD is likely attempting to mitigate public pressure over the handling of POWs by presenting a more proactive approach to POW exchanges.

#### Key Takeaways

- Likely Ukrainian forces conducted an attack against a Grigorovich-class frigate of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) near Sevastopol with unmanned surface vehicles on October 29.
- The Kremlin reportedly relieved the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Alexander Lapin, of his position as the commander of the "central" group of forces in Ukraine.
- Russia is likely expediting efforts to forcibly depopulate areas of Kherson Oblast along the Dnipro River and repopulate them with Russian soldiers, some of them out of uniform in violation of the law of armed conflict.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely responding to pressure levied by milbloggers regarding its treatment of Russian prisoners of war (POWs) and the conduct of prisoner exchanges.
- Ukrainian forces consolidated gains and continued counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian intelligence indicated that the highest quality Russian troops are still responsible for the defense of Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to establish defensive positions on the western bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces likely slowed the pace of offensive operations in the Bakhmut area due to a Ukrainian strike.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian troops launched an offensive in the Vuhledar area.
- Russian troops likely made marginal gains around Donetsk City.
- The Kremlin reportedly instructed Russian judges to not grant prisoners parole but instead to direct them toward recruitment in unspecified private military companies (PMCs).

- The Kremlin is likely conducting an information operation to reduce tensions between Christians and Muslims in Russia to cater to religious minority groups within the Russian armed forces.



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

**Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Katherine Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan**

October 28, 8:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces are not making significant progress around Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast or anywhere else along the front lines.** A Russian information operation is advancing the narrative that Russian forces are making significant progress in Bakhmut, likely to improve morale among Russian forces and possibly to improve the personal standing of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose forces are largely responsible for the minimal gains in the area. Russian forces have made limited advances towards the Ukrainian strongpoint in Bakhmut but at a very slow speed and at great cost. Prigozhin acknowledged the slow pace of Wagner Group ground operations around Bakhmut on October 23 and stated that Wagner forces advance only 100-200m per day, which he absurdly claimed was a normal rate for modern advances.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian forces recaptured a concrete factory on the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut around October 24.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian military officials stated on October 16

that Russian forces had falsely claimed to have captured several towns near Bakhmut within the past several days, but Ukrainian forces held their lines against those Russian attacks.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces are likely falsifying claims of advances in the Bakhmut area to portray themselves as making gains in at least one sector amid continuing losses in northeast and southern Ukraine. Even the claimed rate of advance would be failure for a main effort in mechanized war--and the claims are, in fact, exaggerated.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu declared the end of Russian military mobilization on October 28.** Shoigu stated that military commissariats will recruit only volunteers and contract soldiers moving forward.<sup>[4]</sup> Shoigu stated that Russia mobilized 300,000 men, 82,000 of whom are deployed in Ukraine and 218,000 of whom are training at Russian training grounds.<sup>[5]</sup> Putin stated that 41,000 of the 82,000 servicemen in Ukraine are serving in combat units.<sup>[6]</sup> Putin acknowledged that Russian forces experienced logistical and supply issues with mobilized forces but falsely asserted that these problems affected only the "initial stage" of mobilization and that these problems are now solved.<sup>[7]</sup> Putin stated Russia must "draw necessary conclusions," modernize "the entire system of military registration and enlistment offices" and "think over and make adjustments to the structure of all components of the Armed Forces, including the Ground Forces."<sup>[8]</sup>

Putin likely ended mobilization in Russia to free up administrative and training capacity in time for the delayed start of the Russian autumn conscription cycle, which will begin on November 1.<sup>[9]</sup> Russia's military likely does not have the capacity to simultaneously support training 218,000 mobilized men and approximately 120,000 new autumn conscripts.<sup>[10]</sup> It is unclear how autumn 2022 conscripts will complete their training, moreover, since the usual capstones for Russian conscripts' training involves joining a Russian military unit—which are already fighting in Ukraine and badly damaged.

Russia's now-completed mobilization is unlikely to decisively impact Russian combat power. Putin described a 50-50 split between mobilized personnel in combat and support roles in Ukraine. If that ratio applies generally, it suggests that a total of 150,000 mobilized personnel will deploy to combat roles in Ukraine after training is complete, likely sometime in November. Russia's deployment of 41,000 poorly trained combat personnel to Ukraine may have temporarily stiffened Russian defensive lines, although these reservists have not yet faced the full weight of a major and prepared Ukrainian counteroffensive thrust. The deployment has not significantly increased Russian combat power. The deployment of an additional 110,000 or so mobilized men to combat units therefore remains unlikely to change the trajectory of the war.

**Putin may be attempting to reestablish Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's authority in the Russian information space to balance the growing influence of the Russian pro-war *siloviki* faction.** The Russian *siloviki* faction refers to people with meaningful power bases within Putin's inner circle who are fielding combat forces in Ukraine. Putin could have announced the end of mobilization himself instead of in a meeting with Shoigu or could have tasked Shoigu with concluding the flawed mobilization effort on his own. Their staged public meeting is consistent with the recent surge in Shoigu's media appearances. For example, Shoigu held several publicized calls with his Turkish, Chinese, and Western counterparts between October 23 and 26.<sup>[11]</sup> These high-profile meetings differentiate Shoigu and the Russian higher military command from the *siloviki*, who do not hold the same rank or authority despite their popularity in the Russian information space. Shoigu had made very limited public appearances over the spring and summer.<sup>[12]</sup> Shoigu's presence in the information space depends on the approval of the Kremlin, since Putin can control when and whether Shoigu speaks publicly. Shoigu's *siloviki* rivals control their own Telegram channels and speak freely to the media.

**The growing influence of the *siloviki* faction – led by Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin – is further fracturing the Russian pro-war community.** Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov for the second time criticized the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Alexander Lapin, for his management of the Svatove-Kremenna line on October 27.<sup>[13]</sup> Kadyrov contrasted his harsh criticisms of Lapin with high praise for Prigozhin and Wagner units, even calling Prigozhin a "born warrior." Kadyrov has resumed his criticisms of the progress of the Russian invasion and Russian higher military command since October 25, likely in response to a Ukrainian strike on Chechen units in northeastern Kherson Oblast.<sup>[14]</sup> Kadyrov has since announced that the Ukrainian strike killed 23 Chechen fighters and wounded 58 troops.<sup>[15]</sup>

Kadyrov accused Lapin of failing to communicate with Chechen leaders, claiming that he had unsuccessfully attempted to reach Lapin to discuss Ukrainian breakthroughs around Lyman. Kadyrov added that no one could locate Lapin or his subordinates when one of Lapin's units redeployed from Rubizhne to reinforce the frontlines.<sup>[16]</sup> Kadyrov claimed that Chechen units had to hold Russian defensive positions without Lapin's support, stated that soldiers are increasingly deserting from Lapin's

units, and insinuated that Lapin will soon lose Svatove.<sup>[17]</sup> Kadyrov previously attacked Lapin on October 1 for moving his headquarters far from the frontlines and for his military failures, and Prigozhin publicly agreed with Kadyrov's statement at that time.<sup>[18]</sup> Kadyrov's praise of Prigozhin further demonstrates that *siloviki* are increasingly promoting their parallel military structures at the expense of the reputation of the Russian Armed Forces.

Kadyrov's accusations have once again created a rift among pro-war Russian milbloggers and exposed concerns over the growing influence of the *siloviki* faction within the pro-war community. Some milbloggers expressed their support for Lapin, noting that his failures – such as large losses of military equipment in Chernihiv Oblast or the devastating failure at the Siverskyi Donets river crossing in Bilohorivka – were not as severe as other failures of some Russian military commanders even though these same milbloggers had indirectly criticized Lapin for these incidents.<sup>[19]</sup> Most pro-Lapin milbloggers blamed the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for abstaining from publicly defending Lapin against the likes of Kadyrov and Prigozhin. A milblogger even noted that it is unacceptable for any Russian governor or regional head to criticize the Russian Armed Forces as such critiques can lead "to the direct road to the erosion of the very essence of the Russian state."<sup>[20]</sup> Kadyrov's only formal position is head of the Chechen Republic. The milblogger noted that Russian commanders cannot defend their actions on Telegram – unlike Prigozhin and Kadyrov – and stated that such critiques only ignite internal conflicts. Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels, by contrast, amplified reports of dire conditions on the Svatove-Kremminna frontline, discussing the high number of deserters, low morale, poor living conditions, and command cowardice.<sup>[21]</sup>

Kadyrov's second critique of Lapin indicates a further fragmentation within the pro-war community that may allow Priogozhin to accrue more power in the long-term. Putin will need to continue to appease the *siloviki* faction while attempting to support his disgraced higher military command and retain favor with the milbloggers that respect some conventional Russian military commanders such as Lapin and the Commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, Sergei Surovikin.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are not making significant progress around Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast or anywhere else along the front lines.
- President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced the end of partial mobilization.
- Putin may be attempting to rehabilitate Shoigu's image in the information space to counter the growing influence of the pro-war *siloviki* faction.
- The growing influence of the *siloviki* faction is continuing to fracture the Russian pro-war community.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kremminna and Svatove.
- Russian forces continued to deploy mobilized personnel to and establish defensive positions on the west bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities completed their "evacuation" of parts of occupied Kherson Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities reportedly plan to force Russian citizenship on Ukrainian civilians in occupied parts of Ukraine by October 30, likely in part to legalize the forced mobilization of Ukrainian civilians as part of the November 1 autumn conscription cycle.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing their attempts to erase Ukrainian history, culture, and national identity in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 28, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

George Barros, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 27, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to reject the idea of Ukrainian sovereignty in a way that is fundamentally incompatible with serious negotiations. Putin continued to reject Ukrainian sovereignty during a speech at the Valdai Discussion Club on October 27. Putin stated that the “single real guarantee of Ukrainian sovereignty” can only be Russia, which “created” Ukraine.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin reiterated that it is a “historical fact” that Ukrainians and Russians are fundamentally “one people” that were wrongly separated into “different states.”<sup>[2]</sup> Putin stated on October 26 that Ukraine has “lost its sovereignty” and become a NATO vassal.<sup>[3]</sup>

Putin’s statements reject the legal fact that Ukraine is a fully sovereign state, that the Russian Federation recognized Ukraine’s sovereignty, and that the Ukrainian people exist as a distinct nation. Putin’s perpetuation of the narrative that Ukraine and Russia are a single people separated into different states by arbitrary historical circumstance indicates his continued objective to destroy the Ukrainian state and erase the notion of a Ukrainian people. He added during the question-and-answer period that “if some part of that single ethnicity at some moment decided that it had reached such a level as to consider itself a separate people, then one could only respond with respect.”<sup>[4]</sup> The many conditionals in this comment underscore Putin’s rejection of the idea that there is currently any

independent Ukrainian national identity. These statements, along with many Russian actions, must cause serious reflection on the question of whether Russia's war against Ukraine is a genocidal action since genocide is legally defined as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group."<sup>[5]</sup>

**A senior Russian official threatened that Russia could target Western commercial satellites supporting Ukraine.** Russian Foreign Ministry Deputy Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Konstantin Vorontsov told the United Nations that the United States and its allies were trying to use space to enforce Western dominance and that "quasi-civilian infrastructure may be a legitimate target for a retaliatory strike."<sup>[6]</sup> Reuters reported that US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated that the United States will meet any attack on US infrastructure "with a response."<sup>[7]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to reject Ukrainian sovereignty in a way that is fundamentally incompatible with serious negotiations.
- A senior Russian official threatened that Russia could target Western commercial satellites supporting Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast and along the Kremenna-Lysychansk line.
- Russian forces are continuing to make defensive preparations along the east bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground assaults in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian military sent mobilization notices to foreign citizens working in Russia.
- Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group may be further developing its air warfare capabilities and fielding more complex equipment on par with the conventional Russian military.
- Russian and occupation administration officials began seizing residents' cell phones in Russian-occupied territories to support law enforcement and operational security measures.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

George Barros, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 26, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**A Reuters investigation of a document trove found in an abandoned Russian command post in Balakliya, Kharkiv Oblast, supports ISW's longstanding assessments about the poor condition of Russian forces.** ISW has long assessed that the conventional Russian military in Ukraine is severely degraded and has largely lost offensive capabilities since the summer of 2022, that Russian strategic commanders have been micromanaging operational commanders' decisions on tactical matters, and that Russian morale is very low. Reuters' investigation found that Russian units near Balakliya were severely understrength, with a combat battalion at 19.6-percent strength and a reserve unit at 23-percent strength.<sup>[1]</sup> The investigation found that poor morale, bad logistics, and overbearing commanders contributed to Russian forces' poor performance.<sup>[2]</sup> The report found that the Russian Western Military District explicitly forbade a subordinate from withdrawing from an untenable position in the small village of Hrakove (which has an area of less than three square kilometers).<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian forces defeated Russian forces in Balakliya and routed Russian forces in eastern Kharkiv Oblast around September 8-10.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's rhetoric indicates that he is not interested in negotiating seriously with Ukraine and retains maximalist objectives for the war.** Putin stated that Ukraine has "lost sovereignty" in a meeting with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) security officials on October 26.<sup>[5]</sup> Putin stated that the United States is using Ukraine as a "battering ram" against Russia, the Russian-Belarusian Union State, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the CIS. Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin amplified this narrative, stating that "Ukraine has

lost the ability to exist as a state," "Ukraine is occupied by NATO," and "[Ukraine] has become a colony of the US" on October 26.[6] This language is incompatible with negotiations on an equal basis for a ceasefire, let alone a resolution to the conflict that Russia began. It instead strongly suggests that the Kremlin still seeks a military victory in Ukraine and regime change in Kyiv that would affect the permanent reorientation of Ukraine away from the West and into Russia's control. It also indicates that Putin's aims transcend the territory he has claimed to have annexed, let alone the areas his forces actually control.

**Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast are attempting to mitigate the informational consequences of the chaos of the initial Russian withdrawals from the west bank of the Dnipro River.** Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo stated on October 26 that it would be "practically impossible" to completely destroy the dam at the Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant (HPP) and that even the destruction of the dam locks at the HPP would only cause the water level of the Dnipro River to rise less than 2 meters.[7] Saldo's statement directly contradicts his own prior statements and the warnings made by Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovkin on October 18 that Ukraine is planning to strike the Kakhovka HPP and cause flood damage along the Dnipro River.[8] Saldo's apparent retraction of his own warnings may suggest that he seeks to quell anxiety accompanying the mass movement of civilians and Russian military and occupation elements across the Dnipro in order to preserve his own ability to rule. Saldo also issued assurances about the provision of basic utilities and financial services that he claimed will continue even as evacuations to the east bank are ongoing.[9] Saldo's statements indicate that his administration is attempting to mitigate panic in the information space, likely in order to maintain control of the population of Kherson Oblast against the backdrop of ongoing evacuations.

**Russian forces conducted an assault on Ternova, Kharkiv Oblast, likely to fix Ukrainian forces there and prevent them from reinforcing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations elsewhere.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 26 that Ukrainian forces repelled an attack on Ternova (40km northeast of Kharkiv city) which is well removed from areas encompassed by the eastern Ukrainian counteroffensive.[10] Russian forces likely do not intend to regain limited territory in border areas of Kharkiv Oblast but instead likely hope to keep Ukrainian forces in the area that otherwise could join counteroffensive operations. Russian forces are likely hoping for a similar outcome in northwestern Ukraine with their deployment of forces to the joint grouping of forces in Belarus and the messaging around it.

**Russian officials continued to admit that Russia is deporting children to Russia under the guise of adoption and vacation schemes.** Russian media reported on October 26 that the Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, adopted a Ukrainian child who was deported from Mariupol to Russia.[11] Lvova-Belova claimed that Russian officials have brought 31 children from Mariupol to Russia and that her office is working to "rehabilitate" Ukrainian children from active combat zones. As ISW has previously reported, the forced adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[12]

Russia is also continuing to use the excuse of recreational trips to deport Ukrainian children to Russia and Russian-occupied territory. Member of the Zaporizhia occupation administration Vladimir Rogov reported on October 26 that over 500 children from Enerhodar went on "vacation" in Yevpatoria, Crimea and Anapa, Krasnodar Krai this year alone.[13] Rogov claimed that the children received "new knowledge" as part of the "educational program."[14] Russian-appointed governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhaev similarly claimed that children from occupied Kherson City and Enerhodar took part in "excursions" in Sevastopol.[15] These reports are consistent with ISW's previous observations that Russian officials have used the veneer of such recreation and rehabilitation programs to justify the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russian-controlled territory and areas of the Russian Federation. [16]

**On October 26, Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin denied ISW's report that Prigozhin confronted Putin and other siloviki factions in the Kremlin regarding the progress of the Russian war in Ukraine.[17]** Prigozhin explicitly denied ISW's October 25 assessment and falsely insinuated that ISW receives classified intelligence. ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. ISW specifically does not receive information from Prigozhin's deceased mother-in-law, as he (ironically) suggested.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- A *Reuters* investigation of Russian documents from Balakliya supports previous ISW assessments about the poor conditions of Russian forces.
- Putin stated that Ukraine has “lost its sovereignty” in an October 26 speech indicating that Russia likely retains its maximalist objectives in Ukraine and remains resistant to negotiations.
- Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast are attempting to mitigate the informational consequences of the Russian withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces are attempting to fix Ukrainian forces on Ukraine’s northern border.
- Russian officials continued to acknowledge that Russian authorities are deporting Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of adoption and vacation schemes.
- Yevgeny Prigozhin denied a previous ISW assessment that stated he confronted Putin and other *siloviki* factions regarding the progress of the war in Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations west of Svatove.
- Russian forces continued to prepare defensive positions on the west and east banks of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in northwest Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian military is reportedly attempting to recruit foreigners to support its war effort in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast continued to relocate residents from the west bank of the Dnipro River.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 25, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Members of the Russian *siloviki* faction continue to voice their dissatisfaction with Russian war efforts in Ukraine, indicating that Russian President Vladimir Putin will continue to struggle to appease the pro-war constituency in the long term. The Russian *siloviki* faction refers to people with meaningful power bases within Putin’s inner circle who are fielding combat forces in Ukraine. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov complained that the Russian response to claimed Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory have been “weak,” noting that Russia must “erase Ukrainian cities from the earth.”<sup>[1]</sup> Kadyrov also claimed that Russia is now engaged in a war with Ukraine instead of a “special military operation,” given that Ukrainian forces are fighting on “Russian territory.” Kadyrov noted that he is unhappy with the lack of Russian retaliation despite the establishment of martial law. Kadyrov had remained relatively quiet throughout October.

Kadyrov’s statement indirectly criticizes the scale of the Russian missile campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure and is in line with milblogger critiques that followed days after the first massive campaign on October 10.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that that Putin’s missile campaign is unlikely to satisfy the pro-war nationalist camp in the long term, given that Putin cannot fix the many flaws within the Russian military campaign in Ukraine nor can he deliver his maximalist promises.<sup>[3]</sup> Kadyrov’s rant also highlights Putin’s error in annexing four Ukrainian oblasts before Russian forces reached the oblasts’ borders, which has created confusion about where “Russian territory” begins. ISW has previously reported that Putin’s annexation of Ukrainian territories has likely triggered criticism within the Kremlin elite, which will likely intensify as Putin loses more occupied territories.<sup>[4]</sup>

Russian *siloviki* have also directly confronted Putin regarding the progress of the Russian war in Ukraine, which further highlights their significance within Russian power structures. *The Washington Post*, citing US intelligence, revealed that Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin sharply criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) in a private conversation.<sup>[5]</sup> Prigozhin reportedly accused the Russian MoD of heavily relying on Wagner forces while failing to finance the group or provide necessary resources, which is consistent with his numerous public statements.<sup>[6]</sup> Prigozhin has denied ever criticizing the Russian Armed Forces in response to *The Washington Post* report—a denial that is patently false given his repeated public attacks on the MoD.<sup>[7]</sup>

The criticism revealed by *The Post* further supports ISW's assessment that Prigozhin holds a unique position that allows him to reap the benefits of Putin's dependency on Wagner forces without having formal responsibility for any axis or area in Ukraine and while wielding considerable influence in the information space. Prigozhin is accumulating a following on Telegram (with some Wagner-affiliated channels having over 300,000 followers), is directly interacting with online publications, and is reportedly financing the RiaFan (Federal News Agency) media conglomerate.<sup>[8]</sup> Prigozhin is likely using a growing number of platforms to accrue power and has even previously engaged RiaFan in promoting his September prisoner recruitment drive to Russian audiences.<sup>[9]</sup> **Putin's regime is largely dependent on Putin's monopolization of the state information space, but Prigozhin is increasingly challenging that monopoly.**

**Prigozhin's influence in the information space is evident through the positive portrayal of Wagner forces, despite their failure to make significant advances in the Bakhmut area.** Wagner forces have yet to reach Bakhmut despite fighting there since early summer and are reportedly suffering significant losses.<sup>[10]</sup> Prigozhin himself admitted that Wagner forces advance only 100-200 meters a day, which he absurdly and falsely claimed is the norm for modern warfare.<sup>[11]</sup> Wagner forces are plagued with the same supply and troop quality issues that Prigozhin's criticizes the Russian MoD for allowing to occur within the Russian Armed Forces. Prigozhin, for instance, denied seeing a video in which Wagner troops complained about the lack of food and supplies.<sup>[12]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) also noted that Wagner prisoner recruits suffer from serious infectious diseases like HIV and Hepatitis C, and that Russian doctors are refusing to assist a growing number of infected troops when they are wounded in combat.<sup>[13]</sup>

Prigozhin is able to shape the narrative within Russian milblogger community by consistently deflecting attention from his forces by demeaning the Russian higher military command. He will likely retain his upper hand despite his forces' lack of advances given the Russian information restrictions on the Russian MoD. Prigozhin's close interactions with the media and online community allows him to address any criticism or unfavorable narratives in real time, unlike the Russian MoD or the Kremlin. Prigozhin, for example, denied his involvement with Russian war criminal Igor Girkin less than a day after Russian milbloggers suggested that Girkin is forming a Wagner-based volunteer battalion.<sup>[14]</sup>

**Russian officials are increasingly attempting to rhetorically align Russia's war in Ukraine with religious concepts ostensibly accessible to both Christians and Muslims, likely in order to cater to religious minority groups within the Russian armed forces.** Assistant Secretary to the Russian Security Council Alexei Pavlov amplified statements made by Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov on October 25 that the goal of the war in Ukraine should be "complete de-Satanization."<sup>[15]</sup> Pavlov claimed that Ukrainian society is defined by "fanatics" who seek to abandon values held by the Russian Orthodox church, Islam, and Judaism.<sup>[16]</sup> Kadyrov also declared that the war on Ukraine is now a jihad against Ukrainian "Satanism."<sup>[17]</sup> These statements may represent a desire to deflect dissent among religious minority groups in the Russian Armed Forces. As ISW previously reported, recent schisms between Muslim and non-Muslim servicemen have caused violent outbursts in Russia ranks.<sup>[18]</sup> The invocation of war on religious but not overtly Christian grounds is likely an attempt to transcend religious divides and set information conditions for continued recruitment of ethnic and religious minorities to fight in Ukraine.

**Russian occupation officials continued to indicate that efforts to "evacuate" civilians in Kherson Oblast to the east bank of Dnipro River are part of a wider resettlement scheme.** Kherson occupation deputy Kirill Stremousov claimed on October 25 that occupation officials have moved over 22,000 people from the west bank of the Dnipro to the east bank and that the administration's "resettlement program" (программа переселения) is designed to accommodate 60,000 people.<sup>[19]</sup> Stremousov's statement seemingly admits that Russian occupation officials view the evacuations as precursors to the permanent resettlement of a large population of Ukrainians. It is unclear where Russian officials intend to "resettle" those who move from the west bank. The implication of a permanent program designed to resettle Ukrainians in other Russian-occupied territories, and even within Russia itself, may amount to a violation of international law.<sup>[20]</sup> According to international law, an occupying power has the right to evacuate civilians for their safety with the necessary stipulation that such evacuations are temporary.<sup>[21]</sup> The implication of a "resettlement program" seems to suggest that Russian officials intend to permanently resettle large parts of Kherson Oblast's population.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin held a coordination council meeting on October 25 in which Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin expressed a need to enact additional security measures in border oblasts, likely indicating that the Kremlin intends to utilize recent martial law decrees.** [22] Putin also said that the Russian government needs to work at a high pace and according to an extremely realistic assessment of the national security situation. Sobyanin indicated that Russian officials are proceeding with planned security measures throughout the Russian Federation. These

comments indicate that the Kremlin intends to utilize recent martial law declarations to ease mobilization and military efforts occurring within the Russian Federation.

**Russian independent polling organization Levada posted survey results on October 25 showing that the number of Russians desiring change has declined despite recent societal stresses introduced by sanctions, mobilization, and the war in Ukraine.[23]** The Levada surveys conducted in late September show that the percentage of Russians who believe that Russia needs decisive, full-scale changes decreased from 59 percent in July 2019 to 47 percent in October 2022. The surveys show that the percentage of the Russian public that believes Russia needs only minor changes increased from 31 percent in July 2019 to 36 percent in October 2022 as did the number of Russians who said that Russia needs no change whatsoever, from 8 percent to 13 percent. The Levada surveys show that of those Russians desiring full-scale change, only 11 percent desire a change of government in some fashion. The Levada surveys also show that of those Russians desiring full-scale change, 10 percent desire that the war in Ukraine ends and that Russia begins negotiations with Ukraine. Many changes that Russians wish for are primarily focused on domestic economic issues.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian *siloviki* factions continue to voice dissatisfaction with the Russian war effort in Ukraine, likely indicating that President Vladimir Putin will struggle to appease the pro-war faction.
- Direct confrontations between Putin and *siloviki* members regarding the war in Ukraine illustrate the significance of *siloviki* factions in Russian power structures.
- Russian officials are likely rhetorically realigning the war in Ukraine with religious ideals ostensibly accessible to both Christians and Muslims to cater to religious and ethnic minorities.
- Russian occupation officials continue to claim that the evacuations in Kherson Oblast are a part of a larger resettlement program.
- Levada polling surveys suggest that the Russian public's sentiments toward the Russian government have not fundamentally changed despite societal pressures associated with the war in Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks west of Svatove and on Kremenna on October 25.
- Russian forces continued to establish fallback and defensive positions on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian military continues to mobilize personnel in violation of recruitment policies. Russian mobilization efforts also are placing strains on the Russian labor market.
- Ukrainian partisans conducted an attack targeting the occupation head in Russian-occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Fredrick W. Kagan

October 24, 8:30 PM ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin intensified its information operation to accuse Ukraine of preparing to conduct a false-flag attack using a dirty bomb for a second day in a row on October 24. Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov separately called his counterparts from the United Kingdom and United States about the "situation connected with Ukraine's possible use of a dirty bomb" (a conventional explosive laced with radioactive material that is not a nuclear weapon) on October 24. [1] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu made similar calls with his counterparts from the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Turkey on October 23.[2] The Chief of Russia's Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Protection Forces, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, gave a lengthy briefing accusing Ukraine of planning a dirty bomb false-flag provocation to accuse Russia of detonating a low-yield nuclear weapon in Ukraine on October 24.[3] Russian military bloggers are amplifying this information

operation.[4] ISW assesses the Kremlin is unlikely to be preparing an imminent false-flag dirty bomb attack.[5]

**Russian forces conducted air, missile, and drone strikes against targets in Ukraine at a markedly slower tempo than in previous days.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 24 that Russian forces conducted 2 missile and 28 air strikes, and Ukrainian forces shot down 16 Shahed-136 drones on October 23.[6] The slower tempo of Russian air, missile, and drone strikes possibly reflects decreasing missile and drone stockpiles and the strikes' limited effectiveness of accomplishing Russian strategic military goals.

Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, stated on October 24 that the impact of Russian terrorist strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure is waning as Russian forces further deplete their limited arsenal of cruise missiles.[7] Budanov stated that Russian forces have stopped targeting Ukraine's military infrastructure, instead aiming for civilian infrastructure to incite panic and fear in Ukrainians. Budanov noted, however, that Russian forces will fail as Ukrainians are better adapted to strategic bombing than at the beginning of the war. Budanov claimed that Russian forces have used most of their cruise missile arsenal and only have 13 percent of their pre-war Iskander, 43 percent of Kaliber, and 45 percent of Kh-101 and Kh-555 pre-war stockpiles left, supporting ISW's prior reports on dwindling Russian precision-guided munition stockpiles.[8] Budanov noted that Russian cruise missiles lack precision, as a missile likely intended to hit the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) building in Kyiv missed its target by 800 meters. Budanov stated that Russia's dwindling supply of cruise missiles is forcing the Russian military to rely on Iranian drones but that Iranian suppliers only send 300 drones per shipment and that the drones take a long time to manufacture. Budanov stated that Ukrainian air defenses shoot down 70 percent of all Shahed-136 drones, including 222 of the 330 Russia has used so far. It is impossible to assess the degree to which ongoing unrest and growing strikes in Iran might interfere with Tehran's ability to manufacture and ship drones to Russia.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts on September 30 ignited a schism within the Kremlin, which will likely intensify as Ukraine liberates more territories, according to Budanov.** Budanov stated that Kremlin elites largely did not support Putin's decision to annex Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk Oblasts prior to securing those territories, prompting many officials to contact their Western counterparts to express their disinterest in continuing the war in Ukraine.[9] Budanov claimed that some Kremlin officials began advocating for negotiations with Ukraine to their Western counterparts while the Russian military-political command plotted missile strikes to scare Ukrainians into negotiations. Budanov's statement is consistent with the influx of Western reports about direct criticism of Putin within the Kremlin less than a week after the annexation announcement around October 6.[10] Wagner Group-affiliated Telegram channels also noted the emergence of the pro-war and pro-negotiations factions within the Kremlin within the same timeframe.[11] Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin has been consistently referencing the factionalization within the Kremlin since, even explicitly stating that he is part of the "war until victory" faction.[12] These observations raise the possibility that hints from insiders of a Kremlin readiness to engage in serious negotiations may not reflect Putin's own views or any decisions he has taken but may instead be part of efforts by those who have lost the internal argument with him to persuade the West and Ukraine to offer concessions in hopes of bringing him around to their point of view.

**Prigozhin continues to accrue power and is setting up a military structure parallel to the Russian Armed Forces, which may come to pose a threat to Putin's rule — at least within the information space.** Russian milbloggers reported that Prigozhin is sponsoring the formation of a Wagner-based volunteer battalion recruited by a Russian war criminal and former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Igor Girkin.[13] Girkin is an avid critic of the Russian higher military command and a prominent figure among the Russian ultra-nationalists who participated in the annexation of Crimea or the illegal Russian seizures of Ukrainian territory in Donbas in 2014. Milbloggers noted that the structure of the Russian Armed Forces has long prevented Girkin from forming his own volunteer battalion due to lack of supplies and other bureaucratic restrictions, while Prigozhin has the luxury to operate Wagner forces without the direct supervision of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Milbloggers also noted that the Prigozhin-Girkin collaboration is likely making a large nationalist constituency accessible to Prigozhin in support of his maximalist goals for the war in Ukraine.[14]

Prigozhin holds a uniquely advantageous position within the Russian state structure and information space that allows him to expand his constituency in Russia more readily than the disgraced Russian higher military command. Prigozhin can freely promote himself and his forces while criticizing Kremlin officials or the Russian Armed Force without fear of pushback.[15] Putin depends on Wagner forces in Bakhmut and is likely attempting to appease Prigozhin despite the fact that Prigozhin is undermining the conventional Russian military. Prigozhin, for example, sarcastically stated in an interview that he is

constructing the “Wagner Line” in an effort to make Russian Armed Forces that “hide behind Wagner’s backs” feel safe.[16] Prigozhin also frequently levies his critiques of the Russian military in interviews with Russian online publications and among Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels, which allow him to reach and interact with audiences inaccessible to the Russian MoD, which is restricted in its public statements and means of communication. Prigozhin also benefits from holding no formal position of responsibility. He is not in command of any axis in Ukraine nor in charge of any major bureaucratic effort. He can critique those who are in positions of authority freely without fear that anyone can point to something he was specifically responsible for that he failed to achieve.

Prigozhin has seemingly distanced himself from a fellow strongman, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, after their joint critiques of the Russian higher military command on October 1 drew much attention.[17] This rhetorical shift may indicate that Kadyrov is losing influence and standing and may fear losing his control over the Republic of Chechnya amid the Chechen public’s growing disapproval of his demands in support of Putin’s war.[18]

**Racism and bigotry continue to plague the Russian Armed Forces, increasing the likelihood of ethnic conflicts.** Russian social media footage showed a Russian officer beating a Muslim soldier for attempting to pray at a certain time.[19] While Russian milbloggers denied the authenticity of the footage, previous instances of violence along religious or ethnic lines, such as the shooting on a Belgorod Oblast training ground on October 15, indicate that such problems will intensify throughout time.[20] Racial and religious tensions may also help explain Kadyrov’s relative quieting and Prigozhin’s apparent separation from him.

**Russian forces are likely preparing to defend Kherson City and are not fully withdrawing from upper Kherson Oblast despite previous confirmed reports of some Russian elements withdrawing from upper Kherson.**[21] Budanov stated on October 24 that Russian forces are not retreating from Kherson City but are instead preparing the city for urban combat.[22] This report is consistent with indicators that ISW has observed in late October.[23] Recent reporting about Russian military operations in Kherson have not always distinguished clearly enough between activities in Kherson City and those in western Kherson Oblast generally. Russian forces have begun a partial withdrawal from northwestern Kherson Oblast even while preparing to defend Kherson City. They have not launched into a full withdrawal from the city or the oblast as of this report.

The Russian position in upper Kherson Oblast is, nevertheless, likely untenable; and Ukrainian forces will likely capture upper Kherson Oblast by the end of 2022. A Russian milblogger stated that Russia’s surrender even of Kherson City is overdue, as an attempt to hold the city will likely result in defeat. [24] This milblogger argued that if Russia’s military command decides to wage the war in Ukraine to a successful end, then the surrender of Kherson City is “nothing terrible” in the long run. The Russian military likely has not prepared the information space for a military defeat in Kherson Oblast as of October 24. A Russian milblogger wrote that his Russian military contacts in Kherson Oblast do not want to nor plan to retreat.[25] Russian media has not discussed the possibility of a major military loss in Kherson Oblast besides promoting information operations about a Ukrainian false-flag attack against the Kakhova Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) Dam.[26]

**Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian forces have not yet laid enough explosives to fully destroy the HPP Dam as of October 24.**[27] Budanov observed that the Russians have prepared parts of the dam for limited explosions that would not unleash the full force of the reservoir’s waters. The Russians may seek to damage the top portion of the dam, including the road that runs across it, to prevent the Ukrainians from following after retreating Russian forces if and when the Russians abandon the western bank of the Dnipro River.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin intensified its information operation to accuse Ukraine of preparing to conduct a false-flag attack using a dirty bomb for a second day in a row.
- Ukraine’s Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Major General Kyrylo Budanov stated on October 24 that the impact of Russian terrorist strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure is waning.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin’s annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts on September 30 ignited a schism within the Kremlin, which will likely intensify as Ukraine liberates more territories according to Budanov.
- Prigozhin continues to accrue power and is setting up a military structure parallel to the Russian Armed Forces, which may come to pose a threat to Putin’s rule – at least within the information space.
- Russian forces are likely preparing to defend Kherson City and are not fully withdrawing from upper Kherson Oblast despite previous confirmed reports of some Russian

elements withdrawing from upper Kherson Oblast.

- The Ukrainian General Staff confirmed that Ukrainian forces captured Karmazynivka, Miasozharivka, and Nevske in Luhansk Oblast and Novosadove in Donetsk Oblast.
- Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoit announced the completion of the construction of two reinforced defense lines on the border with Ukraine on October 23 — likely an act of security theater designed to target a domestic Russian audience since there is no danger whatsoever of a Ukrainian mechanized invasion of Russia.
- Wagner Group financer Yevgeny Prigozhin acknowledged the slow pace of Wagner Group ground operations around Bakhmut as Russian forces continued to lose ground near the city.
- Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian force concentrations near the Zaporizhia Oblast front line on October 23–24 and struck a Russian force and equipment concentration in the vicinity of Enerhodar on October 22.
- Hurried Russian mobilization efforts to fix personnel shortages on the front lines have cannibalized the Russian force-generation staff and diminished Russia's ability to effectively train and deploy new personnel and to staff domestic industries.
- Occupation administration officials have taken down communications systems in Kherson City in an attempt to limit civilian reporting on Russian positions to Ukrainian forces ahead of anticipated Ukrainian advances.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

By Mason Clark

October 23, 5:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, October 23. This report focuses on Russian Defense Minister Shoigu's several calls with his western counterparts and preposterous claims that Ukraine is preparing a false-flag "dirty bomb" attack against Russia, likely to pressure Ukraine into concessions and intimidate NATO. On the battlefield, Ukrainian forces conducted further offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine, and Russian forces continued to set conditions for a withdrawal from Kherson. Those developments are summarized briefly and will be covered in more detail tomorrow.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu likely sought to slow or suspend Western military aid to Ukraine and possibly weaken the NATO alliance in scare-mongering calls with several NATO defense ministers on October 23. Shoigu separately called his counterparts from France, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States on October 23, claiming that Ukraine is preparing to conduct a false-flag attack using a dirty bomb (a conventional explosive laced with radioactive material that is not a nuclear weapon) to accuse Russia of using weapons of mass destruction.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian state media amplified this false and ridiculous claim.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian Ministry of Defense reports on the calls contain slight differences; they state that Shoigu discussed a claimed "steady tendency towards further, uncontrolled escalation" in Ukraine in the call with his French counterpart; discussed the "situation in Ukraine" and made false claims that Ukraine is preparing to use a dirty bomb in his calls with the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey; and simply discussed the situation in Ukraine without reference to a dirty bomb in his conversation with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. Shoigu last spoke with Secretary Austin on October 21. Representatives from the United States, United Kingdom, and Ukraine categorically denied and condemned Shoigu's false allegations, and US Secretary Austin called his UK counterpart, Ben Wallace, following the calls with Shoigu.<sup>[3]</sup> France and Turkey have not issued formal statements as of this writing.

The Kremlin is unlikely to be preparing an imminent false-flag dirty bomb attack. Shoigu's claims further a longstanding Russian information campaign. The Kremlin has repeatedly claimed that Western states will help Ukraine conduct a false-flag WMD attack since the earliest stages of its invasion of Ukraine in February. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed it had information the US was "preparing provocations to accuse the Russian Armed Forces of using chemical, biological, or tactical nuclear weapons" in April.<sup>[4]</sup> Putin claimed in his pre-invasion speech on February 24 that Ukraine was preparing for a nuclear attack against Russia, and Russian state disinformation outlets repeatedly claimed Western states were supporting Ukraine's development of nuclear weapons and planning false-flag attacks.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Shoigu's claims likely do not portend Russian preparations to use non-strategic nuclear weapons in Ukraine either.** ISW previously stated on September 30 that "ISW cannot forecast the point at which Putin would decide to use nuclear weapons. Such a decision would be inherently personal, but Putin's stated red lines for nuclear weapon use have already been crossed in this war several times over without any Russian nuclear escalation."<sup>[6]</sup> Russia does not "need," under formal Russian nuclear doctrine, a further event to justify nuclear weapons use.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukraine is not apparently on the verge of tripping some new Russian redline, on the other hand, that might cause Putin to use non-strategic nuclear weapons against it at this time. Shoigu's comments are thus unlikely to presage a nuclear terror attack against one or more major Ukrainian population centers or critical infrastructure in hopes of shocking Ukraine into surrender or the West into cutting off aid to Ukraine. Such attacks would be highly unlikely to force Ukraine or the West to surrender, as Ukraine's government and people have repeatedly demonstrated their will to continue fighting, and the West would find it very challenging simply to surrender in the face of such horrific acts because of the precedent such surrender would set.

Shoigu's calls—and Russian state media's amplification of false dirty bomb threats—are therefore likely intended to intimidate Western states into cutting or limiting support for Ukraine as Russia faces continued military setbacks and the likely loss of western Kherson by the end of the year. ISW has assessed since May that Putin seeks to force Ukraine to accept his terms and deter continued Western support for Ukraine through nuclear brinksmanship.<sup>[8]</sup> The recipients of Shoigu's calls are also notable. The Kremlin has repeatedly framed the United States and the United Kingdom as Ukraine's primary backers and the enablers of what it claims are aggressive policies toward Russia, while France and Turkey have (to varying degrees) framed themselves as mediators in the conflict. Shoigu's round of calls was likely further Russian saber-rattling to intimidate Ukraine's Western supporters and possibly widen fissures within the NATO alliance, not condition setting for imminent nuclear use.

**Key inflections in ongoing military operations on October 23:**

- Russian authorities likely cut internet access in Kherson City on October 22 to limit local reporting of Russian evacuations to the east bank of the Dnipro River.<sup>[9]</sup> Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks in northwestern Kherson Oblast.<sup>[10]</sup>
- Ukrainian and Russian sources reported fighting near Siversk, Soledar, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Marinka in eastern Ukraine.<sup>[11]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[12]</sup>
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.<sup>[13]</sup>
- Russian forces struck Zaporizhzhia City, Mykolaiv City, and other areas in Mykolaiv Oblast with Shahed 136 drones and S-300 missiles.<sup>[14]</sup> Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces targeted Nikopol and Marhanets with multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) strikes.<sup>[15]</sup>
- A spokesperson for the Ukrainian Air Force Command claimed that Ukrainian forces have shot down a total of 273 Iranian-provided Shahed-136 drones since Russia began using them in Ukraine on September 13.<sup>[16]</sup>
- A Ukrainian government source reported that Iranian instructors in Belarus (in addition to previously reported instructors in Crimea) aided Russian forces in the coordination of previous Shahed-136 drone strikes against Kyiv Oblast and northern and western oblasts in Ukraine.<sup>[17]</sup>
- Russian outlets continued to set conditions to blame Ukraine for the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, which Russian forces will likely destroy to slow advancing Ukrainian forces<sup>[18][19]</sup>
- Russian sources widely discussed the construction of defensive positions in Kursk Oblast.<sup>[20]</sup>
- A Ukrainian source reported that Russian authorities in Krasnodar Krai have "indefinitely" extended the "vacations" (meaning forced abductions as part of an ethnic cleansing campaign) of children from Enerhodar, Zaporizhia Oblast.<sup>[21]</sup>
- Russian sources reported that private businesses are offering to train mobilized men on privately owned military and medical equipment in exchange for money.<sup>[22]</sup> Another Russian fighter aircraft crashed into a two-story building in Novo-Lenino, Irkutsk Oblast.<sup>[23]</sup>

**Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 22**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Katherine Lawlor, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark

October 22, 7 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces continued to withdraw from western Kherson Oblast while preparing to conduct delaying actions that will likely be only partially effective.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces have completely abandoned their positions in Charivne and Chkalove (both approximately 33km northwest of Nova Kakhovka), and Russian officers and medics have reportedly evacuated from Beryslav.<sup>[1]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff added that Russian forces are also removing patients from the Kakhovka Hospital on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River, likely to free up hospital beds for Russian military casualties that may result from the withdrawal across the river.<sup>[2]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff noted that some Russian elements are preparing Kherson City for urban combat, while other servicemembers continue to flee the city via the ferry operating in the vicinity of the Antonivsky Bridge.<sup>[3]</sup> The UK Ministry of Defense reported on October 22 that Russian forces completed construction of a barge bridge alongside the damaged bridge and forecasted that the barge bridge would become a critical crossing point for Russian forces as Ukrainian forces advance toward Kherson City.<sup>[4]</sup> A large part of the Kherson City population has also reportedly left the city.<sup>[5]</sup>

Russian forces are preparing a series of delaying actions with mixed efficacy. Russian forces are likely preparing to destroy the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP), flooding and widening the Dnipro River to delay any Ukrainian advances.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian occupation authorities in Nova Kakhovka are likely attempting to moderate the resultant flooding; Nova Kakhovka Occupation head Vladimir Leontyev said on October 22 that Russian authorities are lowering the volume of water from the reservoir behind the dam to minimize damage in case the KHPP is destroyed but stayed true to the false narrative that Ukraine, not Russia, would blow the dam.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukraine has no interest destroying the dam and every interest in preserving the energy supply in newly-liberated parts of Kherson Oblast. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reiterated that Russian military leadership has moved their officer corps across the river but left newly-mobilized men on the western bank of the Dnipro River as a detachment left in contact.<sup>[8]</sup> Using such inexperienced forces to conduct a delaying action could prompt a Russian rout if Ukrainian forces choose to press the attack, as ISW previously assessed.<sup>[9]</sup> One Russian milblogger noted that the situation in Kherson Oblast is dire for Russian troops, noting that it is "virtually impossible" for Russia to evacuate troops from the first lines of defense and that only two questions remain: how to withdraw the final front line of forces, and how to explain the withdrawal to the Russian population.<sup>[10]</sup>

**Russian occupation authorities ordered the forcible "evacuation" of civilians from Kherson City on October 22.** The Russian Kherson Occupation Administration announced that "all citizens of Kherson must immediately leave the city" and said that all civilians and "all departments and ministries of civil administration must now cross over to the [east] bank of the [Dnipro River]."<sup>[11]</sup> The occupation administration cited the "tense" situation at the front, "increased danger of massive shelling of the city and the threat of terrorist attacks" and provided instructions for where evacuees can find boats to take them across the river. The occupation administration encouraged evacuees to bring clothes, valuables, and documents, indicating that they do not expect a rapid Russian or civilian return to western Kherson. Russian forces expect to leave the city and are therefore likely trying to depopulate parts of the oblast that Ukraine will recapture, damaging the long-term social and economic viability of southern Ukraine. Russian authorities are likely also making initial efforts to evacuate at least those civilians who are willing to cooperate with Russian occupation authorities and would otherwise be in the path of flooding resulting from the blown Kakhovka dam.

**Russian forces conducted massive missile and drone attacks to degrade Ukrainian energy infrastructure in nine oblasts on October 22.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 22 that Russian forces launched 40 missile strikes and 16 Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones at Ukrainian infrastructure and that Ukrainian forces shot down 20 Russian cruise missiles and 11 Russian drones.<sup>[12]</sup> Russian strikes hit Ukrainian energy infrastructure in Volyn, Rivne, Kharkiv, Khmelnytskyi, Kirovohrad, Cherkasy, Zaporizhia, Odesa, and Mykolaiv oblasts. Ukrenergo, the Ukrainian state energy company, announced on October 22 that the scale of Russian strikes on October 22 met or exceeded the scale and effect of Russian strikes on October 10-12, which Russian President Vladimir Putin had falsely implied were a discrete response to Ukraine's October 8 attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge.<sup>[13]</sup> Instead, Russian forces are likely attempting to degrade Ukraine's will to fight and to force the Ukrainian government to apply additional resources to protecting civilians and energy infrastructure in lieu of channeling those resources toward Ukraine's counteroffensives in the east and south.

**Ongoing Russian strikes on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure are extraordinarily unlikely to erode the Ukrainian will to fight but will increasingly pose an economic and humanitarian challenge for Ukraine as temperatures drop.** Russian shelling and strikes have damaged approximately 30% of Ukraine's energy infrastructure in recent weeks, prompting rolling blackouts across the country, not just along the front lines.<sup>[14]</sup> Blackouts combined with cold winter weather and damaged civilian buildings will likely increase the suffering of Ukraine's civilian population this winter. Russia's campaign of targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure is creating a humanitarian tragedy without meaningfully altering the battlefield situation, and Russian excuses for such strikes are wearing increasingly thin. The Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Vasily Nevenzya, claimed on October 22 that Russian drones are only hitting civilian targets in Ukraine because Ukrainian defensive fire requires the drones to change course, a bizarre admission of culpability.<sup>[15]</sup>

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to create rifts within the Russian government by publicizing the so-called "Wagner line" of fortifications in northeastern Ukraine, which appears misaligned with Kremlin-led narratives on the course of the war.** Prigozhin and Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels announced that Russian regional officials paused the extension of the Wagner Line fortifications that run behind the line of contact in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts and into Russia's Belgorod Oblast.<sup>[16]</sup> Prigozhin accused the Russian bureaucracy—which he characterized as "bureaucrat-enemies"—of "directly opposing the interests of the population" and not protecting the Russian population by supporting the construction of the line. The Russian nationalist community has repeatedly accused the Kremlin of failing to defend the Belgorod Oblast border, and Prigozhin may be attempting to amplify their demands. The Kremlin is likely attempting to maintain its limited framing of the war, which will likely continue to upset the nationalist community that is seemingly concerned by the lack of defenses around Belgorod Oblast. Prigozhin and Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels previously indicated that there is an ongoing schism within the Kremlin's power circles between officials that are hesitant to continue the war due to personal interest and those in favor of Russian total victory.<sup>[17]</sup>

Russian maps show that Prigozhin's proposed Wagner Line extension would defend the border between Belgorod Oblast and Ukraine's Sumy, Kharkiv, and Luhansk oblasts, but notably would not cover northern Luhansk Oblast up to the line of contact, placing it at odds with Kremlin promises to defend all of Luhansk.<sup>[18]</sup> Other maps show that the Luhansk-Donetsk Wagner Line segment will largely only defend the territory of Luhansk Oblast that Russian proxy forces controlled prior to their February 24 full-scale invasion. The line covers some newly occupied settlements like Lysychansk, Zolote, and Popasna, but excludes Kremenna and Severodonetsk.<sup>[19]</sup> Prigozhin and Wagner commanders are likely preparing to defend the positions they think they can realistically hold, not the present extent of Russian lines or all of the territory the Kremlin claims to have annexed, and are likely not confident in Russia's ability to defend settlements north of Lysychansk such as Kremenna and Svatove.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces continued large-scale strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure. Ongoing strikes are unlikely to erode Ukrainian will to fight but will pose economic and humanitarian challenges throughout the winter.**
- **Russian forces continued to withdraw from western Kherson Oblast while preparing for delaying actions that will likely be only partially effective.**
- **Occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast ordered civilians to evacuate east on October 21. Evacuations from Kherson City will support likely Russian plans to blow up the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Plant (HPP) dam to cover their withdrawal.**
- **Prigozhin-led efforts to build a "Wagner Line" of defensive fortifications extend through central Luhansk Oblast and in limited capacity into Belgorod.**
- **Prigozhin's efforts and messaging, including the creation of the "Wagner Line," are increasingly out of line with Kremlin rhetoric and are critical of what Prigozhin claims are slow-moving "bureaucrat-enemies." Such activism endears Prigozhin to Russian nationalists, who are dissatisfied with limited Kremlin escalation and MoD disorganization.**
- **Russian sources reported Ukrainian counteroffensives in the direction of Kremenna and Svatove on October 22.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks with no confirmed advances to regain lost territory in Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk oblasts on October 22.**
- **Crimean occupation authorities banned filming of infrastructure and military logistics likely due to continued Ukrainian strikes targeting Russian supply hubs and lines.**
- **ISW identified additional reports on October 22 that Russian mobilization has not met force generation goals and will likely continue in alternative forms.**

- Russian and occupation administration officials continued to forcibly relocate residents in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine as of October 22.
- Russian and occupation officials continued to restrict the movement of residents living in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine and increase the checkpoint controls as of October 22.



### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 21, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson Oblast has begun. Russian forces likely intend to continue that withdrawal over the next several weeks but may struggle to withdraw in good order if Ukrainian forces choose to attack. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated on October 21 that Russian forces are "quite actively" transferring ammunition, military equipment, and some unspecified units from the Dnipro River's west bank to the east bank via ferries.<sup>[1]</sup> The Southern Operational Command added that Russian forces deployed 2,000 mobilized men to hold the frontlines and are continuing to shell Ukrainian positions, likely in an effort to cover their withdrawal.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian military officials reported that the Russian occupation administration is preparing the evacuation of

imported Russian specialists, Ukrainian collaborators, and Kherson's banking system.[3] Russian occupation administration in Beryslav and humanitarian facilities in Kherson City also reportedly ceased operations.[4]

The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson requires that a Russian detachment left in contact hold the line against Ukrainian attack, covering other Russian forces as they withdraw. Such a detachment must be well-trained, professional, and prepared to die for its compatriots to effectively perform that duty. The deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, assessed on October 20 that that Russian military leadership may withdraw "the most combat-capable units" from the west bank part of the region to the east bank of the Dnipro River and leave mobilized soldiers in contact to cover the withdrawal.[5] Russian milbloggers seized on Hromov's assessment on October 21 and claimed that Ukrainian officials falsely said that elite units like the VDV and marines are being replaced by untrained mobilized men in Kherson.[6] If Hromov's assessment is correct, then Russian forces would be setting conditions for a Russian withdrawal to become a rout. Russia's poorly trained, newly mobilized reservists are very unlikely to stand and resist a Ukrainian counterattack if Ukrainian forces chose to attack them and chase the withdrawing forces. The collapse of a mobilized reservist detachment left in contact would likely lead to a Ukrainian rout of Russian forces on the same scale as Ukraine's rout of Russian forces in Kharkiv.

Russian officials have remained cagey about whether or not Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered a withdrawal from Kherson and are likely continuing to prepare the information space for such a collapse, as ISW has previously assessed.[7] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov dodged a direct question from reporters addressing the likely withdrawal and directed reporters to the Ministry of Defense on October 21.[8] One Russian milblogger noted on October 21 that Russian forces "will receive bad news from Kherson Oblast" in the coming week and that "November will be very, very hard." [9] A Russian war correspondent told Russian state-controlled television on October 19 that Ukrainian forces outnumber Russian forces by four to one and that "there will be no good news in the next two months, that's for sure ... severe territorial losses are likely in these two months, but defeat in one battle does not mean losing the war." [10]

**Russian forces will likely attempt to blow up the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) to cover their withdrawal and to prevent Ukrainian forces from pursuing Russian forces deeper into Kherson Oblast.** Russian forces will almost certainly blame Ukraine for the dam attack, as ISW has previously assessed.[11] Ukraine has no material interest in blowing the dam, which could flood 80 Ukrainian cities and displace hundreds of thousands of people while damaging Ukraine's already-tenuous electricity supply. Russia, however, has every reason to attempt to provide cover to its retreating forces and to widen the Dnipro River, which Ukrainian forces would need to cross to continue their counteroffensive. Any claims that Russian forces would not blow the dam due to concerns for the water supply to Crimea are absurd. Crimea survived without access to the canal flowing from the Dnipro since Russia illegally invaded and annexed it in 2014 through the restoration of access following Russia's invasion in February 2022. Russian officials have demonstrated their ability to indefinitely supply Crimea with water without access to the canal. Russian forces will try to hold eastern Kherson Oblast not for the water, but rather to provide a buffer zone that enables the defense of Crimea and prevents Ukrainian forces from getting into artillery range of the peninsula. Russian decisionmakers may believe that blowing the dam will enable them to retain that buffer zone. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned on October 21 that blowing the dam could cut water supplies to much of southern Ukraine and would pose a serious risk to the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), which lies upstream of the dam.[12] The ZNPP relies on water from the Kakhovka reservoir to cool its facilities.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin is setting conditions for Russia to continue a protracted high-intensity conventional war in Ukraine, not a negotiated settlement or off-ramp.** The information conditions that the Kremlin has set to enable the Kherson withdrawal, the preparations to blow the dam, and the preparations for additional mobilization and conscription all demonstrate that Putin is not seeking offramps in the near term. Instead, he is setting conditions for improved Russian combat capability over the winter and well into 2023. Putin signed a decree on October 21 creating a Russian government "coordination council" to "strengthen coordination of federal executive branch organs and the federal subjects' executive branch organs" during the war in Ukraine.[13] The council's responsibilities include coordinating federal and regional authorities to meet the needs of the Russian military; resolving military supply issues, forming plans to supply the military; defining the volume and direction of the Russian state budget to support the military; and creating working groups on select issues, among other things.[14] Putin's creation of the coordination council is a continuation of Putin's October 19 declaration of martial law readiness standards, which the Kremlin seeks to use to expand Russian government authorities as way of further transiting Russia to a wartime footing.[15] A prominent Russian milblogger stated that the creation of this council is overdue and that its creation in spring 2022 would have prevented Russia's logistics and supply problems from becoming so acute.

[16] This milblogger stated that Putin's creation of the council was a "step in the right direction" nonetheless.[17] It is a step that Putin need not take if he were seeking to wrap the war up soon or were looking for some sort of off-ramp or pause that he expected to end major combat operations. The creation of this new coordinating body instead sets conditions for a high level of mobilization of the Russian state, economy, and society for continued high-intensity conventional military operations for the foreseeable future. Putin continues to show his willingness to pay a high price in domestic discontent to pursue a military resolution of the war he initiated on his terms, showing through his actions a marked disinterest in any serious concessions or ceasefire negotiations that could lead to sustainable peace.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson Oblast has begun. Russian forces likely intend to continue that withdrawal over the next several weeks but may struggle to withdraw in good order if Ukrainian forces choose to attack.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is demonstrably setting conditions for Russia to continue a protracted war in Ukraine, not for a negotiated settlement or offramp.
- Russian forces will likely attempt to blow up the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) to cover their withdrawal from Kherson City and to prevent Ukrainian forces from pursuing Russian forces deeper into Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on October 21 creating a Russian government "coordination council" to improve wartime federal coordination.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported fighting northeast of Kharkiv City along the international border, on the Svatove-Kremminna frontline, and west of Lysychansk.
- Ukrainian military officials offered a limited overview of the situation on the frontline.
- Ukraine's Southern Operational Command emphasized that Russian forces are using Ukrainian civilians as human shields when transporting military equipment across the Dnipro River, while Russian sources released footage showing a line of civilians awaiting the ferry from Kherson City.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast and routine fire west of Hulyapole and in Mykolaiv Oblast.
- Russian authorities are attempting to maintain the façade of sustainable and strong logistics in southern Ukraine while accelerating measures to compensate for the Kerch Strait Bridge attack.
- Fissures between regional Russian officials, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and military commissariats, and the Russian civilian population from which mobilization draws will likely intensify in the coming months.
- Russian authorities are preventing Ukrainians in Russia from leaving Russia with complex residency and permit requirements to cross international borders.
- Russian occupation authorities continued the mass forced removal of civilians from the west bank of the Dnipro River under the guise of civilian "evacuations."

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 20, 7:00pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russia is likely continuing to prepare for a false flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP).** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on October 20 that Russian forces mined the dam of the Kakhovka HPP and noted that the HPP holds over 18 million cubic meters of water, which would cause massive and rapid flooding of settlements along the Dnipro River, including Kherson City.[1] Zelensky emphasized that the flooding would impact hundreds of thousands of people.[2] Russian sources, however, continued to accuse Ukrainian forces of shelling the Kakhovka HPP and have widely circulated graphics depicting the flood path in the event of a dam breach.[3] As ISW reported on October 19, Russian sources are likely setting information conditions for Russian forces to blow the dam after they withdraw from western Kherson Oblast and accuse Ukrainian forces of flooding the Dnipro River and surrounding settlements, partially in an attempt to

cover their retreat further into eastern Kherson Oblast.[4] Continued Russian preparation for a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka HPP is also likely meant to distract from reports of Russian losses in Kherson Oblast.

**Russian forces are likely setting conditions to remove military and occupation elements from the west bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of imminent Ukrainian advances.** Kherson City Telegram accounts claimed on October 20 that Russian forces disbanded and looted a fire station in Kherson City and ferried fire trucks, stolen civilian cars, and other miscellaneous household items across the Dnipro River to Hola Prystan.[5] ISW cannot independently confirm those reports. The Ukrainian service of *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* also reported on October 20 that Russian forces are moving military equipment from the west bank to the east bank of the Dnipro River in the face of recent Ukrainian advances, and posted satellite imagery that shows a Russian cargo ferry traveling across the Dnipro River from Kozatske (west bank) to Nova Kakhovka (east bank).[6] *Radio Liberty* noted that the ferry is fully loaded when it arrives at Nova Kakhovka and empty when it returns to Kozatske and suggested that this movement has been ongoing since early October.[7] Taken in tandem, these reports indicate that Russian troops are likely deliberately removing large amounts of personnel and equipment from the west bank of the Dnipro River. Russian forces have likely learned, at least in part, from their failures during the panicked Russian retreat from Kharkiv Oblast in the face of a previous Ukrainian counteroffensive. The militarily sensible thing would be to remove men and equipment in good order to avoid another devastating rout. Such a rout in Kherson could trap Russian forces and equipment on the west bank of the Dnipro River.

**The White House confirmed on October 20 that Iranian military personnel are in Russian-occupied Crimea, Ukraine, to assist Russian forces in conducting drone attacks on Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure.** US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that "a relatively small number" of Iranian personnel are in Crimea to train Russian personnel in the use of unfamiliar Iranian-made drones.[8] Kirby emphasized that "Tehran is now directly engaged on the ground and through the provision of weapons that are impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, that are killing civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure in Ukraine" and warned that Russia and Iran will continue to lie about their partnership. Russian officials have continued to deny their purchase of Iranian drones, but the existence of the deal is increasingly common knowledge even within Russia. A member of the Russian Ministry of Defense Public Council, Ruslan Pukhov, believed he was not being recorded when he told a Russian television host live on air on October 20 that "we won't rock the boat too much, so I ask you not to [focus] too much on those Iranian [drones], like that classic story: 'you have an ass but no word for it.' We all know that they're Iranian, but the authorities are not admitting that."[9] Iranian officials have also denied the sales despite the widespread Russian use of Iranian drones in Ukraine since mid-September, but Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei boasted on October 19 that "a few years ago, when pictures of [Iran's] advanced missiles & drones were published, they said they're photoshopped pictures! Now they say Iranian drones are dangerous [and ask] why do you sell them to so & so?"[10]

**Iran is providing military support to Russian forces in Ukraine despite new international sanctions likely in part because Iranian leaders believe that they need Moscow's help to upend the US-led global order.** The European Union imposed additional sanctions on Iranian officials and the manufacturer of the Shahed-136 drones that Iran has sold to Russia for use in Ukraine on October 20.[11] Senior Iranian officials and state media frequently argue that Tehran must expand strategic relations with Russia and China to cooperate toward countering US global influence.[12] Iranian leaders may worry that a Russian failure in Ukraine would seriously disrupt this vision and possibly threaten Vladimir Putin's hold on power and, therefore, Iran's security. Iran could further expand its military support to Russia in the coming months.

**The risk of a Russian offensive from Belarus into northern Ukraine remains low despite a prominent Ukrainian official's October 20 warning that the risk of a Russian offensive from Belarus is "growing."** The deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, stated that the risk of a renewed offensive from Russian forces against northern Ukraine is growing.[13] Hromov stated that Russian forces may attack northwest Ukraine to disrupt Ukrainian supply lines from Western partner countries. Such a course of action remains unlikely in the coming months given that Russian forces lack the capability even to interdict Ukrainian supply lines from the west with a ground offensive. The nearest Ukrainian east-west rail line is 30 km from the Belarusian border, and the Pripet Marshes in northern Ukraine and Belarus make maneuver warfare across the international border in Volyn and Rivne oblasts exceptionally difficult. Ukraine's road and rail network has sufficient nodes with Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary that a Russian incursion from Belarus could not seriously degrade Ukrainian logistical lines without projecting deeper into Ukraine than Russians did during the Battle of Kyiv, when Russian forces were at their strongest. Those forces are now significantly degraded. A Russian milblogger reiterated on October 20 that the Russian force group in Belarus is too small to threaten Kyiv.

[14] White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby reiterated on October 20 that Belarus may concentrate manpower on the border to fix Ukrainian forces in northern Ukraine and prevent their deployment to the active area of operation in southern and eastern Ukraine, as ISW has assessed.[15]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russia is likely continuing to prepare for a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP).
- Russian forces are likely setting conditions to remove military and occupation elements from the west bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of imminent Ukrainian advances.
- The White House confirmed on October 20 that Iranian military personnel are in Russian-occupied Crimea, Ukraine to assist Russian forces in conducting drone attacks on Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure.
- Iran is providing military support to Russian forces in Ukraine despite new international sanctions likely in part because Iranian leaders believe that they need Moscow's help to upend the US-led global order.
- Iran is providing military support to Russian forces in Ukraine despite new international sanctions likely in part because Iranian leaders believe that they need Moscow's help to upend the US-led global order.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Russian forces are consolidating limited regained positions in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast on October 20 despite Ukrainian reports that Ukraine has liberated all but 1.8% of Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian sources indicated that Ukrainian troops have advanced in northern Kherson Oblast as Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast but Russian sources contradicted their own claims on control of Bakhmut. Russian forces are likely continuing to falsify claims of advances in the Bakhmut area to portray themselves as making gains in at least one sector amid continuing losses in northeast and southern Ukraine.
- Russian regional governments and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continue to blame each other for military administrative failures.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 19, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian authorities are likely setting information conditions to justify planned Russian retreats and significant territorial losses in Kherson Oblast.** Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovkin reported during an appearance on Russian television that the Russian military leadership has to make "difficult decisions" regarding Kherson Oblast and accused Ukraine of planning to strike civilian and residential infrastructure in Kherson Oblast.[1] Kherson Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo relatedly noted that his administration is evacuating the west bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of a "large-scale" Ukrainian offensive.[2] Surovkin's and Saldo's statements are likely attempts to set information conditions for a full Russian retreat across the Dnipro River, which would cede Kherson City and other significant territory in Kherson Oblast to advancing Ukrainian troops. Russian military leaders have evidently learned from previous informational and operational failures during the recent Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast and are therefore likely attempting to mitigate the informational and operational consequences of failing to defend against another successful Ukrainian advance.

**Russian forces are also setting information conditions to conduct a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP). The Russian military may believe that breaching the dam could cover their retreat from the right bank of the Dnipro River and prevent or delay Ukrainian advances across the river.** Surovkin claimed on October 18 that he has received information that Kyiv intends to strike the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP),

which he alleged would cause destructive flooding in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[3]</sup> Saldo echoed this claim and warned that Ukrainian forces intend to strike dams upstream of Kherson City.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian authorities likely intend these warnings about a purported Ukrainian strike on the Kakhovka HPP to set information conditions for Russian forces to damage the dam and blame Ukraine for the subsequent damage and loss of life, all while using the resulting floods to cover their own retreat further south into Kherson Oblast. The Kremlin could attempt to leverage such a false-flag attack to overshadow the news of a third humiliating retreat for Russian forces, this time from western Kherson. Such an attack would also further the false Russian information operation portraying Ukraine as a terrorist state that deliberately targets civilians.

**Russia continues to use the guise of civilian “evacuations” as a cover for the mass forced removal of civilians from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.** Saldo’s announcement of a mass withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River is likely intended in part to evacuate Russian occupation officials, collaborators, and other occupation organs in anticipation of imminent Ukrainian advances, but Russian officials are likely also using the façade of humanitarian necessity to deport large populations of Ukrainians to Russia, as ISW has previously reported. Russia does not appear to reap any economic benefits from resettling tens of thousands of unwilling Ukrainians in Russia, suggesting that the purpose of such removals is both to damage Ukraine’s long-term economic recovery as it retakes its territory and, more importantly, to support Russia’s ethnic cleansing campaign, which is attempting to eradicate the Ukrainian ethnicity and culture.<sup>[5]</sup> The Russians may also intend to press “evacuated” Ukrainians into their armed forces, offsetting the losses and failures of the partial mobilization.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin’s October 19 declaration of martial law readiness is largely legal theater meant to legitimize activities the Russian military needs to undertake or is already undertaking while creating a framework for future mobilization and domestic restrictions.**

[6] Putin declared varying levels of “martial law readiness” across Russia and in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories. These declarations outline four levels of readiness, ranging from “maximum” (full-scale martial law in Russian-occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) to “basic” (across all of Russia).<sup>[7]</sup>



Putin did not formally declare martial law outside of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts, but instead directed areas outside Ukraine to build out the legal framework necessary to support Russian mobilization.<sup>[8]</sup> Putin’s speech framed the declaration of martial law in four Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine as a continuation of the wartime status quo, adjusted to Russian legal frameworks after Russia’s illegal annexation of those territories.<sup>[9]</sup> Putin’s decree did not spell out immediate next steps under martial law or elevated readiness levels but granted sweeping emergency powers to regional governors and gave local authorities until October 22 to develop and submit specific proposals for those next steps. Additional information will become apparent as regional governors and law enforcement submit and implement those proposals, which will likely be directed at least in part by the Kremlin but laundered through local authorities. Putin also left himself a path to expand his declarations of martial law, noting that “If necessary, in the Russian Federation during the period of martial law, other measures provided for by the [federal law covering martial law] may be applied.”<sup>[10]</sup> That language leaves open the door for future declarations and expansions of government authorities.

**Putin's decrees identified several sectors in which the Russian state will be exerting increasing control:**

- In areas of maximum and medium readiness, the decree calls for unspecified "mobilization measures in the economic sphere," likely to provide economic and industrial support to Putin's so-called "partial" mobilization of at least 300,000 Russian men.
- In all areas, the decree makes provisions for government control of transportation and communications infrastructure as well as increased security around government buildings and other critical infrastructure.
- In areas of maximum application of martial law (Russian-occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk), the decree calls for the establishment of "territorial defense" headquarters with unspecified roles.
- In areas of medium and elevated readiness, the decree enables regional leaders to take measures for territorial defense and civil defense.
- In areas of medium readiness, the decree enables governments to forcibly "temporarily resettle" civilians.
- The decree also includes vague language for each category, authorizing local authorities to "implement measures to meet the needs of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, other troops, military formations, bodies and needs of the population." Such language could be used to legalize almost any government action.
- In areas of elevated, medium, and maximum readiness, the decree allows for restricting movements of people and vehicles. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Yevgeny Ivanov claimed on October 19 that the government does not currently intend to restrict movement out of the country.[11] However, Putin's decree would likely provide legal cover for the implementation of such restrictions without passing additional decrees.

**These moves closer to full-scale martial law are unsurprising but disordered—a competent modern military should implement economic mobilization, secure lines of transportation, and coordinate territorial defense before or as initial mobilization for war begins, not as follow-on reserve mobilization nears its completion** (Putin announced on October 14 that his "partial" mobilization would end by early November).[12] These moves are likely necessary to fulfill basic military requirements, such as feeding, housing, equipping, and transporting mobilized and conscripted troops to the front lines; forcing defense contractors or other private businesses to align with government production requirements; and more easily controlling both the Russian population and the Ukrainian civilian populations in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.

**Putin has slow-rolled his introduction of legal concepts and frameworks like military and economic mobilization, annexation, and martial law to the Russian population since September, attempting to normalize these concepts and limit domestic dissent.** Putin likely understands that these measures are unpopular but may be counting on an upswell of fatalistic patriotism as more Russian families and businesses become tied to, and implicated in, the war in Ukraine. By gradually introducing additional measures, he likely also intends to work out likely unsolvable bureaucratic flaws in the Russian system, creating a more competent bureaucracy to implement the autumn conscription cycle (beginning November 1) as well as likely future waves of mobilization.

**Putin also may be setting conditions for a less orthodox kind of under-the-radar mobilization: the creation of Ukrainian-style Territorial Defense Forces.** Putin ordered local authorities to create a "territorial defense headquarters" in the four occupied Ukrainian oblasts and empowered local governors to undertake unspecified "territorial defense activities" in medium and elevated readiness areas (largely territories that border or are near Ukraine). This preparation likely serves at least two purposes: creating a legal framework for the forcible mobilization of Ukrainian civilians in Russian-occupied territories, as ISW has forecasted, and at least experimenting with a new kind of Russian military force.[13] Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces played a critical role in the defense of Kyiv and the recapture of other key Ukrainian cities. Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces are composed of a core of veterans and part-time reservists, largely officers, but can be built out by civilian volunteers in wartime who are then led by the officer corps.

**Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may also be driving Putin toward unconventional methods of continuing the war.** Prigozhin announced on October 19 that he sent senior Wagner commander Andrey Bogatov to Belgorod Oblast within the last two weeks to "create a people's militia." Prigozhin claimed that Wagner instructors will teach this "people's militia" to "defend the borders of the oblast."[14] The term he used for "people's militia" (*narodnoe opolcheniye*) has a long history in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union but is essentially an irregular and untrained force that fights behind the frontlines or beside a conventional army. Prigozhin may be attempting to draw upon the historical notion of a people's militia fighting a great patriotic war to reinvigorate Russian enthusiasm

for the invasion of Ukraine, a notion that may appeal to the historically-minded Putin. However, Prigozhin's proposed Belgorod People's Militia is not apparently similar to the more structured Territorial Defense Forces and uses different language, suggesting at least rhetorical tension between the Kremlin's and Prigozhin's visions.

**Prigozhin is also continuing efforts to set himself and Wagner Group forces apart from conventional Russian military elements.** The Russian outlet RIA claimed that Wagner engineering units are actively building a fortified "Wagner Line" that runs adjacent to territories in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts.[15] Prigozhin reportedly stated that the construction of the "Wagner Line" is meant to protect other elements of the Russian Armed Forces while Wagner units capture more territory in Donetsk Oblast.[16] Prigozhin's statements indicate that he is likely continuing to promote Wagner units as superior to conventional Russian Armed Forces in a bid to increase his influence among Kremlin officials. Russian outlet RIA published a supposed map of the "Wagner line" that suggests that Prigozhin and Wagner forces may expect the Russian military to lose considerable territory in Luhansk Oblast, putting Prigozhin's publicity of the line at odds with the specious Kremlin narrative that Russia will hold all of Luhansk Oblast.[17]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian authorities are likely setting information conditions to justify planned Russian retreats and the loss of significant territory in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces are setting information conditions to conduct a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP); the Russian military may believe that breaching the dam could cover their retreat from the right bank of the Dnipro River and prevent or delay Ukrainian advances across the river.
- Russia continues to use the guise of civilian "evacuations" as a cover for the mass forced removal of civilians from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's October 19 declaration of martial law readiness is largely legal theater meant to legitimize activities the Russian military needs to undertake or is already undertaking while creating a framework for future mobilization and domestic restrictions.
- Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is continuing efforts to set himself and Wagner Group forces apart from conventional Russian military elements.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited assaults to recapture lost territory in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly continued to conduct assaults in the Kremmin-Svatove area.
- Russian sources widely claimed that Ukrainian troops conducted another offensive push in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin passed a decree on October 19 seeking to address Russian military personnels' ongoing concerns about timely payments and setting the blame on Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Finance Minister Anton Siluanov for future payment issues.
- The Russian parliament proposed legal measures that would allow Russian authorities to minimize the domestic impacts of partial mobilization in potential future mobilization waves.
- Russian military officials continued to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian residents of Russian-occupied territories to labor or fight on behalf of the Russian military.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Mason Clark

October 18, 8:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces continued to target critical Ukrainian civilian infrastructure with air, missile, and drone strikes on October 18.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 19 missile strikes and 68 air strikes against over 10 areas, including Kyiv, Zhytomyr City, Kharkiv City, Dnipro City, Kryvyi Rih, Zaporizhzhia City, Mykolaiv City, Odesa City, and other areas in Donetsk,

Kherson, and Mykolaiv Oblasts.<sup>[1]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces targeted unspecified areas with 43 kamikaze drones, 38 of which Ukrainian forces shot down.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces continued to strike Ukrainian infrastructure and military command facilities.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on October 18 that Russian strikes between October 10 and October 18 destroyed 30% of Ukrainian power stations in a likely attempt to demoralize Ukrainian civilians that is unlikely to succeed.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Current and former US officials confirmed to the *New York Times* on October 18 that members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) are in Russian-occupied Crimea to train Russian forces on how to use the Iranian drones they purchased, thereby enabling likely Russian war crimes.**<sup>[5]</sup> ISW had assessed on October 12 that any Iranian personnel in Ukraine were likely IRGC drone trainers.<sup>[6]</sup> The *New York Times* reported that it remains unclear whether Iranian trainers are flying the drones themselves, or merely teaching Russian forces how to do so. Russian forces have directed dozens of Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones against civilian targets in Ukraine since mid-September, prioritizing creating psychological terror effects on Ukrainian civilians rather than achieving tangible battlefield effects.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's unequal implementation of partial mobilization is causing social fractures that are driving the Russian information space to further marginalize ethnic minority communities.** As ISW has previously reported, an October 15 shooting at a Belgorod Oblast training ground was likely a natural consequence of the Kremlin's continued policy of using poor and minority communities to bear the brunt of force generation efforts while protecting ethnic Russians and wealthier Russian citizens.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian sources blamed that shooting on two ethnically Tajik Russian citizens who had been forcibly mobilized.<sup>[8]</sup> The Russian information space has largely responded with virulently xenophobic rhetoric against Central Asian migrants and other peripheral social groups. "A Just Russia" Party Chairperson Sergey Mironov posted a long, xenophobic critique of Russia's migration policy on October 18, claiming that mobilization exposed systemic fractures within the Russian immigration system.<sup>[9]</sup> Mironov blamed military commissars for allowing people who pose a threat to Russian security into the Russian Armed Forces and accused military commissariats of keeping their doors wide open for individuals from Central Asia. Mironov proposed a moratorium on granting Russian citizenship to citizens of Tajikistan.<sup>[10]</sup> Mironov's calls for immigration reform demonstrate the role that partial mobilization has seemingly played in catalyzing ethnic divisions, racism, and xenophobia in the Russian domestic space, especially against ethnic minorities.

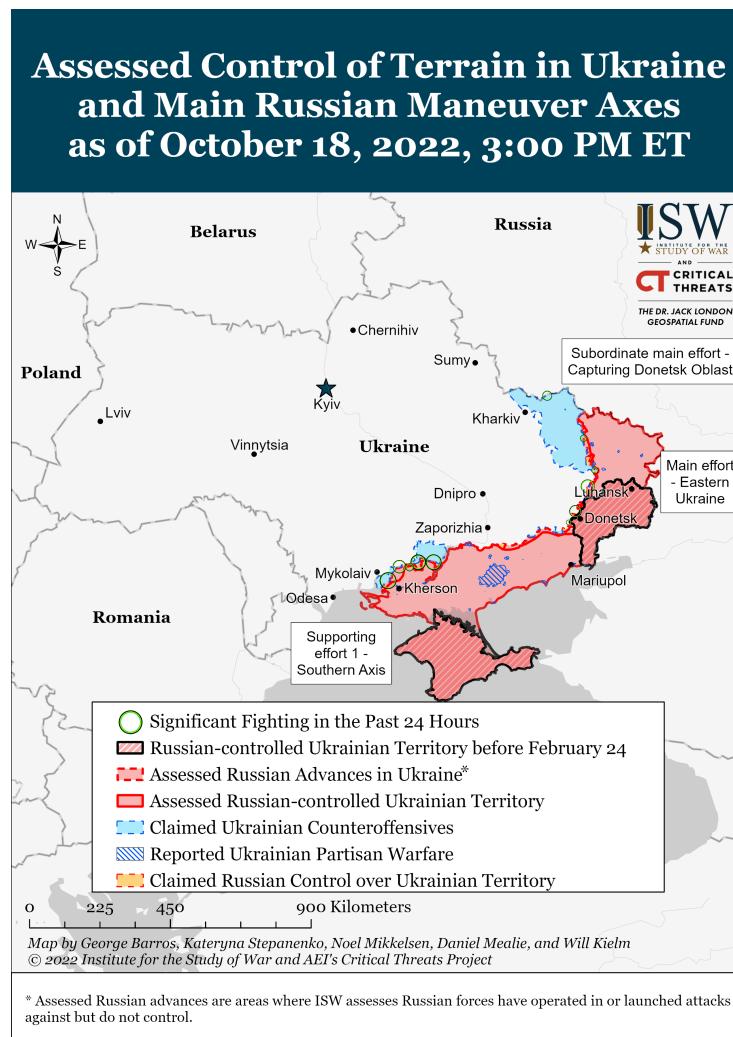
**Belarus continues to provide its territory and airspace to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine but remains highly unlikely to enter the war on Russia's behalf.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 18 that Belarus continues to allow Russia to use Belarusian military infrastructure and airspace to launch missile, air, and Shahed-136 drone attacks on Ukraine.<sup>[11]</sup> Geolocated social media footage shows Russian military hardware moving through Belarus by rail, which is consistent with ISW's previous assessments that Belarus will continue to engage in the war as a co-belligerent without Belarusian forces directly participating in combat operations.<sup>[12]</sup> The Russian Armed Forces are almost certainly too degraded to reopen a northern front against Ukraine from Belarusian territory in the coming months. The Ukrainian General Staff also noted that Belarusian Armed Forces are conducting covert mobilization under the guise of training sessions, although mobilization in Belarus is likely an attempt by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to demonstrate his support to Putin rather than a tangible indicator of Belarusian military involvement in Ukraine.<sup>[13]</sup>

**Russian troops conducted a limited ground attack in northern Kharkiv Oblast on October 18, seemingly suggesting that Russian forces may retain territorial aspirations in Kharkiv Oblast despite massive losses during recent Ukrainian counteroffensives.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled a Russian attack on Ohirtsye, a settlement 2km south of the international border and about 50km northeast of Kharkiv City.<sup>[14]</sup> The nature of this limited incursion is unclear, but it may suggest that Russian troops are continuing offensive operations near the border. Considering the current, constantly degrading state of Russian offensive capabilities in Ukraine, Russian troops are very unlikely to make any gains in this area.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces continued to target critical Ukrainian civilian infrastructure with air, missile, and drone strikes.
- Russian troops conducted a limited ground attack in northern Kharkiv Oblast, seemingly suggesting that Russian forces may retain territorial aspirations in Kharkiv Oblast despite massive losses during recent Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- Current and former US officials confirmed that members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) are in Russian-occupied Crimea to train Russian forces on how to

- use the Iranian drones they purchased, thereby enabling likely Russian war crimes.
- Belarus continues to provide its territory and airspace to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine but remains highly unlikely to enter the war on Russia's behalf.
  - Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast to regain lost positions.
  - Russian sources stated that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations across the entire frontline in Kherson Oblast.
  - Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) and ammunition depots in central Kherson Oblast.
  - Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
  - Russian authorities are struggling to cope with their reduced logistics capacity through Crimea following the attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge.
  - Russian occupation authorities kidnapped Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) personnel, likely to strengthen physical control over the ZNPP's operations.
  - The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed that mobilization ended on October 17 in Moscow Oblast, and Russian civilians continue to express their dissatisfaction with Russian mobilization.
  - Russian occupation officials are attempting to incentivize Ukrainian citizens under Russian control in northern Kherson Oblast to flee to Russia as Ukrainian forces advance, and occupation authorities may increasingly force Ukrainian civilians to relocate further behind the frontlines or to Russia in the coming days.



#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

October 17, 8:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against residential areas and critical infrastructure throughout Ukraine on October 17.** Russian troops struck Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia City, and areas in Vinnytsia, Sumy, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv Oblasts and launched nine missile strikes and 39 air strikes on October 17.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian Air Force spokesperson Yuriy Ignat noted that Russian forces launched 43 drones from southern Ukraine, 37 of which Ukrainian troops destroyed and the majority of which were Iranian Shahed-136 drones.<sup>[2]</sup> Five Shahed-136 drones struck infrastructure in the Shevchenkivskyi district of Kyiv, including the UkrEnergo (Ukrainian electricity transmission system operator) building.<sup>[3]</sup>

**The October 17 drone attack on residential infrastructure in Kyiv is consistent with the broader pattern of Russian forces prioritizing creating psychological terror effects on Ukraine over achieving tangible battlefield effects.** US military analyst Brett Friedman observed on October 17 that a Shahed-136's payload is 88 pounds of explosives, whereas a typical 155mm M795 artillery round carries 23.8 pounds of explosives, which means that one Shahed-136 drone carries about three shells worth of explosive material but without the consistent pattern of fragmentation.<sup>[4]</sup> Friedman suggested that the five Shahed-136s that struck Kyiv had the effect of 15 artillery shells fired at a very large area.<sup>[5]</sup> Such strikes can do great damage to civilian infrastructure and kill and wound many people without creating meaningful military effects. This analysis suggests that Russian forces are continuing to use Shahed-136 drones to generate the psychological effects associated with targeting civilian areas instead of attempting to generate asymmetric operational effects by striking legitimate military and frontline targets in a concentrated manner.<sup>[6]</sup>

**A fratricidal altercation between mobilized servicemen at a training ground in Belgorod Oblast on October 15 is likely a consequence of the Kremlin's continual reliance on ethnic minority communities to bear the burden of mobilization in the Russian Federation.** Russian sources reported that the shooting took place after mobilized servicemen from Dagestan, Azerbaijan, and Adygea complained to their commander that the war in Ukraine is not their war to fight, to which the commander responded that they are fighting a "holy war" and called Allah a "coward," causing a fight to break out between Muslim and non-Muslim servicemen.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian sources then claimed that three mobilized Tajik servicemen opened fire at the training ground, killing the commander and both contract and mobilized soldiers.<sup>[8]</sup> Eyewitnesses claimed that the shooters told Muslim servicemen to stand aside as they opened fire.<sup>[9]</sup> The Russian information space immediately responded to the incident with racialized rhetoric against Central Asians and called for the introduction of a visa regime in Russia.<sup>[10]</sup>

Much of the Kremlin's campaign to avoid general mobilization has fallen along distinct ethnic lines, and ethnic minority enclaves have largely borne the brunt of Russian President Vladimir Putin's force generation efforts.<sup>[11]</sup> ISW previously reported on the prevalence of volunteer battalions formed in non-Russian ethnic minority communities, many of which suffered substantial losses upon deployment to Ukraine.<sup>[12]</sup> This trend continued following Putin's announcement of partial mobilization, after which authorities continued to deliberately target minority communities to fulfill mobilization orders.<sup>[13]</sup> ISW also previously noted that the asymmetric distribution of mobilization responsibilities along ethnic lines led to the creation of localized and ethnically based resistance movements, which ISW forecasted could cause domestic ramifications as the war continues.<sup>[14]</sup> The Belgorod shooting is likely a manifestation of exactly such domestic ramifications. Ethnic minorities that have been targeted and forced into fighting a war defined by Russian imperial goals and shaped by Russian Orthodox nationalism will likely continue to feel alienation, which will create feed-back loops of discontent leading to resistance followed by crackdowns on minority enclaves.

**Wagner Group financier Yevheny Prigozhin and Wagner-affiliated social media outlets are increasingly commenting on the ineffectiveness of traditional Russian military institutions and societal issues, which may indirectly undermine the Kremlin's rule.** Prigozhin reiterated that only Wagner troops are operating in the Bakhmut direction, seemingly denying the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) claims DNR forces are operating in the area.<sup>[15]</sup> Prigozhin also emphasized that he fully sponsors all of the equipment for his troops when responding to a question about whether the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) assists Wagner with supplies. Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels published footage in which elements of the 126th Separate Guards Coastal Defense Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet thanked Wagner for providing them with military equipment.<sup>[16]</sup> ISW had previously reported that the 126th Coastal Defense Brigade issued a video appeal regarding its lack of military

equipment on the Kherson frontline.<sup>[17]</sup> Prigozhin additionally offered a realistic portrayal of the situation in Bakhmut, noting that Ukrainians are unwilling to surrender. Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels commented on the Belgorod training ground shooting incident, noting that a “quiet civil war” is currently ongoing in Russia due to the Russian government’s long-term inability to restrict migration presumably from Central Asian countries.<sup>[18]</sup>

Prigozhin’s narratives have the ingredients to appeal to the Russian President Vladimir Putin’s nationalist constituency that has long called for oligarchs to finance supplies for the armed forces, demanded transparency about what is really going on at the front, and criticized Russian higher military institutions for their failures on the frontlines. While Prigozhin does not directly oppose or criticize Putin, his growing notoriety within the nationalist community may undermine Putin’s “strongman” appeal by comparison. The emerging discussions about a civil war in Russia may further disrupt the Kremlin’s narratives about the national, ethnic, and religious unity within Russia.

**Russia is continuing to leverage its relationship with Iran to obtain drones and missiles, likely to compensate for its increasingly attrited missile arsenal.** *The Washington Post* reported on October 16 that Iran will likely supply additional missiles, including the Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar short-range ballistic missiles, to Russia in addition to Shahed-136, Mohajer-6, and Arash-2 drones.

<sup>[19]</sup> Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani, however, claimed on October 17 that Iran has not provided weapons to “either side,” despite ample reporting by Russian, Iranian, Ukrainian, and Western sources to the contrary.<sup>[20]</sup> A Russian Telegram channel noted that the recent Russian use of Iranian munitions, particularly the Shahed-136s, is likely reflective of the fact that Russia has nearly exhausted most of its domestic stock of operational-tactical weapons.<sup>[21]</sup> The channel claimed that Shahed-136s fulfil the role of cruise missiles but allow Russia to circumvent sanctions while maintaining its ability to conduct deep operational strikes.<sup>[22]</sup>

**A Russian Su-34 crashed near an apartment building in Yeysk, Krasnodar Krai on October 17.** Russian sources claimed that the Su-34 crashed due to an issue with one of its engines.<sup>[23]</sup> The Su-34 crashed carrying ammunition that detonated on impact causing a fire that engulfed the nearby apartment building.<sup>[24]</sup> A Russian source claimed that the crash killed one person and seriously injured three others.<sup>[25]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted drone and missiles strikes against residential areas and critical infrastructure facilities throughout Ukraine on October 17.
- Russian drone strikes against residential areas in Kyiv on October 17 are indicative of Russian forces prioritizing psychological terror over tangible battlefield gains.
- Yevgeny Prigozhin and affiliated Telegram channels are increasingly commenting on the ineffectiveness of traditional Russian military institutions, which may be undermining the Kremlin.
- A fratricidal altercation between mobilized servicemen at a training ground in Belgorod Oblast on October 15 is likely a consequence of the Kremlin’s continual reliance on ethnic minority communities to bear the burden of mobilization in the Russian Federation.
- Russia is continuing to leverage its relationship with Iran to obtain drones and missiles, likely to compensate for its increasingly attrited missile arsenal.
- A Russian Su-34 crashed near a residential building in Yeysk, Krasnodar Krai on October 17.
- Russian sources continued to discuss potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations northwest of Svatove on October 16 and 17.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian Forces are conducting counteroffensive operations in Kherson Oblast on October 16 and 17.
- Russian forces conducted ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast on October 16 and 17.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian concentrations of manpower and equipment in Zaporizhia Oblast on October 16 and 17.
- Russian authorities continued measures to exert full control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Moscow City officials announced the completion of partial mobilization in the city on October 17, likely in an effort to subdue criticism among Moscow residents of reports of illegal mobilization in the city.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continue to promote “vacation” programs to residents of Russian-occupied territories likely as pretext for the deportation of Ukrainian citizens and the resettlement of Russian citizens.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 16

[Click here to read the full report](#)

This campaign assessment special edition focuses on the specific parts of Ukrainian territory currently under Russian occupation that are important for the long-term viability of an independent Ukraine. Ukrainian forces are currently conducting a counteroffensive push in Kherson Oblast as of October 16. We will update our maps after information about the new front lines unambiguously enters the open-source environment.

**Ukraine must regain certain specific areas currently under Russian occupation to ensure its long-term security and economic viability.** Ukraine's ability to defend itself against a future Russian attack requires liberating most of Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts. Ukraine's economic health requires liberating the rest of Zaporizhia Oblast and much of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, including at least some territory Russia seized in 2014. Ukraine's security would be materially enhanced by liberating Crimea, which would also benefit NATO's ability to secure its southeastern flank.

**Ukraine has every right to fight to liberate all the territory Russia has illegally seized, particularly in light of the continued atrocities and ethnic cleansing Russia is perpetrating in the areas it occupies.** Kyiv's insistence on regaining control of Ukrainian territory to the internationally-recognized borders is not an absolutist or extremist demand—it is the normal position of a state defending itself against an unprovoked attack as part of a war of conquest. It is also the default position of the international community under international law, as it should be. Nothing in the following discussion should be construed as supporting any attempt to encourage, let alone coerce, Ukraine to abandon either its claims or its efforts to free all its land and people.

**However, Ukraine also requires the liberation of the areas mentioned above for purely strategic military and economic reasons.** ISW continues to assess that Putin's intentions toward Ukraine are unlikely to change whether or not a ceasefire or some other settlement occurs. The Kremlin would use any suspension of hostilities to consolidate its gains and freeze the frontline in the best configuration Putin can get to prepare for future coercion and aggression against Ukraine. Those seeking enduring peace in Ukraine must resist the temptation to freeze the lines of combat short of Ukraine's international borders in ways that set conditions for renewed conflict on Russia's terms. The purpose of this brief essay is to consider why specific parts of Ukrainian territory still under Russian occupation are so important for the long-term viability of an independent Ukraine that is not a financial ward of the international community and can effectively defend itself against a renewed Russian invasion.

The Dnipro River is a formidable obstacle for its entire course in Ukraine. Any military would struggle to cross it in the face of prepared defenders. The current Russian lodgment on the west bank in Kherson Oblast is therefore a vital piece of terrain. If a ceasefire or any sort of agreement suspends fighting with the Russians still in possession of that lodgment, the prospects for a renewed Russian offensive in southern Ukraine would be vastly improved. If Ukraine regains control of the entire west bank of the river, on the other hand, the Russians would likely find ground attacks against southwestern Ukraine extraordinarily difficult. The long-term defensibility of Mykolayiv, Odesa, and the entire Ukrainian Black Sea coast thus rests in no small part on the liberation of western Kherson.

Parts of Kherson Oblast on the east bank of the Dnipro are also strategically critical, however. The oblast follows the line of the river to its mouth and then juts out into the Black Sea, coming to within about 40 miles of Odesa. The tip of the Kinburn Spit, the northwesternmost point of this part of Kherson Oblast, is less than 2.5 miles from the city of Ochakov on the west bank of the Dnipro. Russian military positions in these areas allow Russian forces to bring artillery, drone, and missile fire against much of the Ukrainian Black Sea coast from many short-range systems without having to use expensive longer-range capabilities that will always be in shorter supply. These short distances also make the prospect of amphibious operations far more plausible and easier to support by fire than if the Russians had to conduct them from bases in Crimea. **Ukraine's hold on its entire western Black Sea coast will remain tenuous as long as Russia holds territory in southwestern Kherson much further north than the 2014 lines.**

**Tracing defensible lines requires constantly referring to the roughly 25-kilometer maximum effective range of the 152mm artillery system.** All modern armies have ground-based systems with much longer ranges, to be sure. But 152mm guns are relatively easy and inexpensive to mass produce, as are the rounds they fire. They are also effectively impossible to defend against when used at scale. Systems exist that can shoot down individual artillery rounds (as well as missiles and drones), but not that can shoot down thousands of them at a time. The Russians showed how effective massed bombardments by such weapons can be in their seizures of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, where they pounded Ukrainian troops with artillery and enabled relatively weak Russian ground forces

to advance. Planners must assume that Ukrainian positions within 25 kilometers of Russian lines may be subjected to massive artillery barrages from the outset of a renewal of hostilities.

**Sound military doctrine also teaches that one does not attempt to defend a position by standing on it—reliable defenses must be established well forward of the points or lines that must be held.** The Dnipro River should not be Ukraine's first line of defense, but rather its last. Contested river crossings are very difficult but can be made easier if the attacker can make all preparations right at the river, including establishing protected artillery positions, pre-positioning bridging equipment, amassing necessary supplies, and generally laying in all the infrastructure needed to get across a wide river while the defenders fight back. The river is most reliable as a defense if the Russians must first advance to it and then prepare to cross it while Ukrainian defenders disrupt their efforts.

Ukraine must therefore be able to establish and hold positions on the eastern bank of the river. Those positions cannot be in a narrow strip along the river, however. They must be far enough away from the river that a concerted Russian attack cannot easily throw them back against the river itself—a potentially disastrous position for the defender. They must also be far enough east to keep the Russians out of artillery range (about 25 kilometers) of the west bank to prevent the Russians from bombarding Ukrainian defenders on that bank from the outset of a renewed invasion. The 2014 line of contact north of Crimea was close to the limit of how far Russian forces can be allowed to hold ground in the south without beginning to put the Ukrainian defense of the Dnipro and what lies behind it at risk. The distance from the northwesternmost part of those lines to the river at closest approach is about 70 kilometers, which is far enough to allow Ukraine to establish front-line defenses at the line of contact and then a main defensive area out of tube artillery (152mm) range, from which Ukrainian defenders could retreat some distance if necessary while still keeping the Russians out of artillery range of the river and avoiding finding themselves pressed right up against the river.

**Consideration of key terrain in eastern Kherson and western Zaporizhia Oblasts must integrate security and economic concerns because of the location of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) at Enerhodar.** The plant provided a significant proportion of Ukraine's electricity before the 2022 invasion, and its loss would require considerable investment to replace the generating capacity and possibly redesign elements of Ukraine's electrical grid. The liberation of Enerhodar in a way that allows the plant to come back online is therefore central to containing the costs in time and money of the restoration of Ukraine's economy, which is in turn central to allowing Ukraine to avoid becoming an expensive ward of the international community.

Russia's demonstrated irresponsibility toward nuclear facilities in Ukraine also makes restoring the ZNPP to Ukrainian control essential from a security perspective. Russian forces damaged the inactive Chernobyl facilities, kicking up radioactive dust and irradiating themselves in the process. Russian false-flag operations and the use of the ZNPP grounds as a base for conventional military operations show a similarly cavalier attitude toward the dangers of bringing war to a massive nuclear power plant. Allowing Moscow to retain control of the ZNPP puts Ukraine and all Black Sea states at permanent risk of the downstream consequences of Russia's willingness to play with nuclear fire. The Russians must therefore also be kept out of artillery range of Enerhodar. Taking an approach to calculating required positions similar to the one used above would bring the line required to allow Ukrainian forces to reliably defend the ZNPP about 50 kilometers south of Enerhodar in principle. That line would be about 40 kilometers northwest of Melitopol, the next major geographical feature to consider.

Melitopol is a critical junction of roads that run from the Dnipro around the Nova Kakhovka Dam to the Sea of Azov coast and ultimately Mariupol on the one hand and that run from Crimea north to the city of Zaporizhia on the other. If the Russians retain control of Melitopol and the roads running south and east of it, they can and likely will turn it into a major militarized base from which to launch mechanized attacks across the largely flat steppe land to its north and west. Such a base, which could come to be similar to Belgorod, Russia, in the extent of military facilities and capabilities it houses, would be a permanent threat to the ZNPP, Ukrainian positions on the east bank of the Dnipro River, and the major cities of Zaporizhia and Dnipropetrovsk as well. If Ukraine regains control of Melitopol, on the other hand, the Russians would be confined to Crimea and the narrow and vulnerable road and rail connections across the Perekop Isthmus that separates Crimea from the mainland. Defense against such an attack is far easier than would be a defense against an attack that could use Melitopol as a well-stocked and fully prepared forward base.

Further east the weight of consideration becomes more economic. The Donbas—the area of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts divided by the line of control since 2014—had been a single integrated economic unit for centuries. Its mineral deposits were extracted and sent by rail to the port of Mariupol, on the one hand, and to Ukrainian industries in the west on the other. The 2014 Russian seizure of large parts of Donetsk Oblast disrupted this economic activity to Ukraine's detriment. Permanently removing

the entire Donbas would do far more serious economic damage to Ukraine. The reconstruction of a viable Ukrainian economy that does not require large amounts of long-term international financial assistance requires restoring the Donbas economic region to Kyiv's control.

The military requirement for that restoration includes the Ukrainian liberation of Mariupol and the road and rail networks north via Volnovakha toward Donetsk City and to the west toward Melitopol and Zaporizhia City. Establishing secure Ukrainian control over Mariupol requires liberating at least some of the land the Russians had seized in 2014. The line of control resulting from that invasion was too close to the city to allow its defenders to avoid encirclement in the face of determined attacks. The same calculations used above regarding 152mm artillery ranges would argue that Ukraine must actually recapture all its land to the internationally recognized border, in fact.

Similar economic arguments hold for the historically industrial cities of Donetsk, Severodonetsk, and Luhansk. In the remaining areas of occupied northeastern Ukraine, the balance of concern shifts primarily to the agricultural sector. Grain plays such a critical part in Ukraine's economy that one could straightforwardly calculate the cost of each lost hectare and consider the requirements to offset that loss over the long term as part of the price of ceding any of this land to Russia.

Northeastern Ukraine does contain some strategically important areas, however. The towns of Svatove, Starobilsk, and Bilovodsk sit on major road junctions, control of which determines in part which bases in Russia proper the Russians can use to support future attacks in Ukraine directly. Russia has major mechanized bases at Valuiki and Boguchar to the northwest and northeast of Luhansk Oblast. Russian forces have been flowing from their bases around Belgorod via Valuiki into northern Luhansk Oblast on the road that runs to Starobilsk and thence westward via Svatove to Kharkiv Oblast. The railway that runs from just north of Luhansk via Starobilsk to the Russian border is particularly important because Russian forces are heavily dependent on rail to move equipment and supplies. The base at Boguchar can also flow forces into Ukraine along a road that runs through Bilovodsk, however. Allowing Russia to retain control of these key junctions and the road and rail networks on which they sit would give Moscow a significant advantage in building up for a renewed invasion from the northeast.

**The Crimean Peninsula, finally, is strategically important for NATO as well as Ukraine.** Russian possession of the peninsula allows Russia to base anti-air and anti-shipping missiles 325 kilometers further west than it could using only the territory it legally controls. It lets Russia position aircraft in Sevastopol, about 300 kilometers further west than airbases on the territory of the Russian Federation. These differences matter greatly to the scale and scope of the air and missile threat Russia can pose to NATO's southeastern flank as well as to Russia's ability to prepare and support future invasions of Ukraine. Of all the Ukrainian lands NATO should desire Ukraine to regain for NATO's own interests, Crimea should be at the top of the list.

Principled legal, moral, and ethical considerations require supporting Ukraine's efforts to regain its lost lands and people and should not be dismissed. The aim of this essay has been to show that purely military realities and strategic considerations lead to the same conclusion. If Ukraine is to emerge from this war able to defend itself against a future Russian attack and with a viable economy that does not rely on long-term international financial support, it must liberate almost all its territory.

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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 15

[Click here to read the full report](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 15, 8:30pm ET

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Russia continues to conduct massive, forced deportations of Ukrainians that likely amount to a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign in addition to apparent violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat

Khusnulin stated on October 14 that “several thousand” children from Kherson Oblast are “already in other regions of Russia, resting in rest homes and children’s camps.”[1] As ISW has previously reported, Russian authorities openly admitted to placing children from occupied areas of Ukraine up for adoption with Russian families in a manner that may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[2]

Russian authorities may additionally be engaged in a wider campaign of ethnic cleansing by depopulating Ukrainian territory through deportations and repopulating Ukrainian cities with imported Russian citizens. Ethnic cleansing has not in itself been specified as a crime under international law but has been defined by the United Nations Commission of Experts on violations of humanitarian law committed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia as “rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area” and “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.”[3] According to the UN definition, ethnic cleansing may be carried out by forcible removal, among other methods.[4] These definitions of ethnic cleansing campaigns are consistent with reports of the forcible deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children, as well as reports by Ukrainian sources that reconstruction projects in Mariupol are intended to house “tens of thousands of Russians” who will move to Mariupol.[5]

**Prominent Russian milbloggers who yesterday announced the existence of “hit lists” reportedly originating with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and targeting milbloggers for their coverage of operations in Ukraine walked back their claim on October 15.** As ISW reported on October 14, prominent Russian milblogger Semyon Pegov of the WarGonzo Telegram channel accused “individual generals and military commanders” of the Russian MoD of developing a “hitlist” of Russian milbloggers whom the MoD intends to prosecute for “discrediting” the MoD’s handling of the war in Ukraine.[6] Pegov’s claim was amplified by several other milbloggers and generated substantial panic about censorship in the hyper-nationalist Russian information space.[7]

Pegov announced on October 15, however, that “there are no more lists”, and that the issue of lists has been removed from the agenda and congratulated his following and the wider milblogger community for being untouchable in the face of attempted crackdowns.[8] Pegov also reiterated that he has been aware of the list for weeks and knew that administrative and political power structures had already begun working on investigations of individual channels. Pegov claimed that he has learned who the author of the list was and praised his followers and colleagues for supporting him. Other prominent milbloggers amplified Pegov’s statements and stated that milbloggers continue to lead the fight for truth in the information space.

As ISW has previously assessed the announcement of mobilization served as a catalyst for a breakdown in the Russian information space that put the increasingly alienated MoD further at odds with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the cohort of milbloggers that he has periodically supported and empowered.[9] The Russian milblogger community may have strategically weaponized the rumors of MoD hit lists against the MoD itself by exposing the information and appearing to defeat the MoD attacks against it—whether or not they were real in the first place. The discourse surrounding the existence of these lists indicates continued structural fractures between the MoD establishment, the milbloggers, and the Kremlin.

**The Wagner Group Private Military Company is likely continuing efforts to assert its supremacy over the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and conventional Russian ground forces.** A video posted to social media on October 13 shows servicemen of the 126th Coastal Defense Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet in an unspecified location in Kherson Oblast complaining that they have been fighting in the area since the beginning of the war without breaks or troop rotation.[10] The servicemen asserted that they are being “crushed” by Ukrainian forces and emphasized that they have one BTR (armored personnel carrier) for 80 people, which is greatly restricting their maneuverability.[11] After the video circulated, a Wagner Group-affiliated Telegram channel announced on October 14 that Wagner Group leadership decided to transfer four off-road vehicles to the 126th Coastal Defense Battalion in support of their efforts to hold the frontline in Kherson Oblast.[12] This exchange is noteworthy in light of ISW’s previous assessment that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is actively attempting to curry favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin and set Wagner Group forces apart from conventional MoD forces.[13] The move to donate basic equipment to a detachment of conventional Russian ground forces may be an implicit critique of the MoD’s apparent inability to provide such necessities to its own soldiers.

**Russia may have signed a new contract with Iran for the supply of Arash-2 drones.** Ukrainian and Russian Telegram channels reported “leaked” information from unspecified Iranian sources that Russia has purchased an unknown number of Arash-2 drones, which are purportedly faster and more destructive than the Shahed-136 drones that are currently in use by Russian forces.[14] Commander

of the Iranian Ground Forces Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari previously claimed in early September that the Arash-2 drones have unique long-range capabilities and could target cities in Israel such as Tel Aviv and Haifa from bases in Iran.[15] Reports that Moscow is continuing to rely on Tehran for destructive munitions are consistent with a report from the US Treasury Department that suggests Russia is rapidly expending its supply of microelectronics that are critical for the military-industrial complex because it cannot replace key components unavailable because of sanctions.[16] Russia will likely continue to leverage its relationship with Iran to circumvent sanctions, although it is very unlikely that Russian forces will use the Arash-2 to any greater effect than they have used the Shahed-136 model.[17]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russia is conducting forced deportation of Ukrainians that likely amount to a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign in addition to apparent violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.
- Prominent Russian milbloggers who yesterday announced the existence of “hit lists” reportedly originating with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and targeting milbloggers for their coverage of operations in Ukraine walked back their claim on October 15.
- The Wagner Group Private Military Company is likely continuing efforts to assert its supremacy over the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and more conventional Russian ground forces.
- Russia may have signed a new contract with Iran for the supply of Arash-2 drones.
- Russian forces continued counterattacks west of Kremenna.
- Russian milbloggers widely discussed the likelihood of a Ukrainian counteroffensive on Kremenna and Svatove.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops launched a general counteroffensive in northern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces likely struck Russian military assets situated along Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Zaporizhia Oblast and southern Donetsk Oblast.
- Mobilized Russian forces engaged in a fratricidal altercation at a training ground in Belgorod Oblast.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continued to enact restrictions on movement and conduct strict law enforcement activities in Russian-occupied territories

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#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mapes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 14, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin likely attempted to make a virtue of necessity by announcing that his “partial” mobilization will end in “about two weeks”—the same time the postponed fall conscription cycle is set to begin. Putin told reporters on October 14 that “nothing additional is planned” and that “partial mobilization is almost over.”[1] As ISW previously reported, Putin announced the postponement of Russia’s usual autumn conscription cycle from October 1 to November 1 on September 30, likely because Russia’s partial mobilization is taxing the bureaucracy of the Russian military commissariats that oversee the semiannual conscription cycle.[2] Putin therefore likely needs to pause or end his partial mobilization to free up bureaucratic resources for conscription. Putin ordered the conscription of 120,000 men for the autumn cycle, 7,000 fewer than in autumn 2021. However, Russia’s annexation of occupied Ukraine changes the calculus for conscripts. Russian law generally prohibits the deployment of conscripts abroad. Russian law now considers Russian-occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts to be Russian territory, however, ostensibly legalizing the use of conscripts on the front lines.

**Putin may intend for mobilized personnel to plug gaps in Russia's frontlines long enough for the autumn conscripts to receive some training and form additional units to improve Russian combat power in 2023.** Putin confirmed on October 14 that mobilized personnel are receiving little training before they are sent to the frontlines. Putin announced that of the 220,000 people who have been mobilized since his September 21 order, 35,000 are already in Russian military units and 16,000 are already in units "involved in combat missions."<sup>[3]</sup> Putin also outlined the training these mobilized forces allegedly receive: 5-10 days of "initial training," 5-15 days of training with combat units, "then the next stage is already directly in the troops taking part in hostilities." This statement corroborates dozens of anecdotal reports from Russian outlets, milbloggers, and mobilized personnel of untrained, unequipped, and utterly unprepared men being rushed to the frontlines, where some have already surrendered to Ukrainian forces and others have been killed.<sup>[4]</sup> Even the 10 days of training that mobilized personnel may receive likely does not consist of actual combat preparation for most units; anecdotal reports suggest that men in some units wandered around training grounds without commanding officers, food, or shelter for several days before being shipped to Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> Many would-be trainers and officers were likely injured or killed in Ukraine before mobilization began.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian training grounds are also likely understaffed, a problem that will likely persist into the autumn conscription cycle. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 14 that Russian military officials in Krasnodar Krai suspended sending mobilized persons to the training grounds in Primorsko-Akhtarsk until November 1 because Russian training grounds are not ready to accommodate, train or comprehensively provide for a large number of personnel.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Ukrainian and Western officials continue to reiterate that they have observed no indicators of preparations for a Belarusian invasion of Ukraine, despite alarmist reports in the Belarusian information space that President Alexander Lukashenko has introduced a "counter-terrorist operation" regime.**<sup>[8]</sup> Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei gave an interview to Russian outlet *Izvestia* on October 14 wherein he claimed that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko introduced a "counter-terrorist operation regime" after a meeting with several law enforcement agencies.<sup>[9]</sup> Makei cited concern that unspecified neighboring states were planning provocations related to seizure of areas of Belarusian territory.<sup>[10]</sup> This claim was amplified by several Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian sources, who claimed that as part of the "counter-terrorist operation regime," Lukashenko began deploying groups of Belarusian forces supplemented by Russian troops.<sup>[11]</sup> Belarusian opposition outlet *Nasha Niva* claimed that as part of this regime, Belarusian forces are conducting covert mobilization under the guise of combat readiness checks.<sup>[12]</sup> However, Lukashenko emphasized in a comment to the press that there has been no introduction of a "counter-terrorist operation regime" and that he has instead introduced a "regime of a heightened terrorist threat."<sup>[13]</sup>

Despite the contradicting claims of an escalated preparatory regime in Belarus, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told *Voice of America* that there are no indicators that Belarusian troops are preparing to enter Ukraine.<sup>[14]</sup> ISW continues to assess that joint Belarusian and Russian forces will not invade Ukraine from the territory of Belarus. Russian forces continue to attrit their own combat capabilities as they impale themselves on attempts to capture tiny villages in Donbas and simply do not have the combat-effective mechanized troops available to supplement a Belarusian incursion into northern Ukraine and certainly not to conduct a mechanized drive on Kyiv. As ISW has previously reported, Lukashenko remains unlikely to enter the war on Russia's behalf due to the domestic risks this would pose for the continued viability of his regime, as well as the low quality of Belarusian Armed Forces.<sup>[15]</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin is more likely weaponizing concerns over Belarusian involvement in the war to pin Ukrainian troops against the northern Ukraine-Belarus border.

**Russian authorities are continuing to engage in "Russification" social programming schemes that target Ukrainian children.** A local news outlet from Russia's Novosibirsk Oblast reported on October 13 that 24 orphans from Luhansk Oblast arrived in Novosibirsk for placement with Russian foster families.<sup>[16]</sup> Ukrainian Mayor of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov similarly reported that Russian occupation authorities in Melitopol and other occupied regions are deporting Ukrainian children to Russian-occupied Crimea, Krasnodar Krai, and Tula and Volgograd Oblasts under the guise of "children's trips" and "further education" programs.<sup>[17]</sup> As ISW has previously reported, such forced deportations of Ukrainian children to Russia and Russian-occupied territory may constitute violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>[18]</sup> Occupation authorities in Russian-occupied Mariupol are also reportedly pressuring Ukrainian teenagers to join the "Youth Guard," a children's paramilitary organization that encourages anti-Ukrainian sentiments. Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported on October 14 that uniformed members of the Youth Guard visited a Ukrainian school and gave children one week to consider joining the group.<sup>[19]</sup> The coerced engagement of Ukrainian children in youth militarization programs fits into wider Russification schemes intended to erase Ukrainian identity in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on October 14 that there is currently no additional need for further massive strikes against Ukraine.** Putin claimed that Russian forces struck 22 of their 29 intended targets and that there are now unspecified “other tasks” for Russian forces to accomplish.[20] Putin’s statement was likely aimed at mitigating informational backlash among pro-war milbloggers who oppose curtailing the costly missile campaign; Russian milbloggers had largely praised the resumption of strikes against Ukrainian cities but warned that a short campaign would be ineffective. Putin’s statement supports ISW’s previous assessment that Putin knew he would not be able to sustain high-intensity missiles strikes for a long time due to a dwindling arsenal of high-precision missiles.[21] Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov claimed on October 14 that Russian forces have 609 high-precision missiles left from the pre-war stockpile of 1,844.[22] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued cruise missile, aviation, kamikaze drone, and anti-aircraft missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in Kyiv Oblast, Zaporizhzhia City, Mykolaiv City, and other areas in Mykolaiv Oblast on October 14.[23] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on October 14 that Russian forces targeted Ukrainian command and control elements and energy infrastructure in Kyiv and Kharkiv oblasts with sea-based missiles. [24] These reports demonstrate a lower tempo of strikes than the 84 cruise missile strikes reported on October 10.[25]

**A prominent Russian milblogger accused unspecified senior officials within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of preparing to censor Russian milbloggers on October 14.** Prominent Russian milblogger Semyon Pegov (employed by Telegram channel WarGonzo) accused “individual generals and military commanders” of developing a “hitlist” of Russian milbloggers that the MoD seeks to criminally prosecute for “discrediting” the Russian MoD’s activity and the Russian special military operation in Ukraine.[26] Russian news aggregator *Mash* reported on October 14 that Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov personally signed an order instructing Russian state media censor Roskomnadzor to investigate prominent Russian milbloggers Igor Girkin (also known as Igor Streletskiy), Semyon Pegov (WarGonzo), Yuri Podolyaka, Vladlen Tatarsky, Sergey Mardan, Igor Dimitriev, Kristina Potupchik, and authors of the Telegram channels GreyZone and Rybar. Unspecified Russian authorities detained the manager of several milblogger Telegram channels linked to Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on October 5.[27] Moscow police previously arrested and released Pegov under unusual circumstances (reportedly for drunkenly threatening a hotel administrator) in Moscow on September 2.[28] The situation will likely become clearer in the coming days. A key indicator for the status of a crackdown on Russian milbloggers will be any status update from former Russian militant commander and nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin. Girkin has not posted since October 10—a significant change in his behavior given that he usually posts multiple times daily. [29]

**There has been no official confirmation of an investigation or prosecution of these milbloggers as of October 14.** Senior Russian propagandist and *RT* Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan responded to Pegov’s claim on October 14 and implied that prosecuting military bloggers is not only a bad idea but impossible to implement.[30] Many milbloggers expressed outrage at the prospect that elements of the Russian government would seek to censor ardent patriots who seek to hold the MoD accountable and expressed hopes that “rumors” about the milblogger hitlist are untrue.[31] The interests of the Kremlin do not intrinsically align with the MoD in this situation: Putin has overtly courted the support of the milblogger community in recent months, as ISW has extensively covered, and has used the milbloggers to frame senior MoD officials and the MoD as a whole as possible scapegoats for military failures in Ukraine.[32] Nor did the milbloggers blame the Kremlin for the alleged hitlist; Pegov emphasized that this sort of alleged censorship was likely not Putin’s intention when he opened dialogue with milbloggers in June and called for reporters and journalists to tell the truth about the “special military operation.”[33]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that his “partial” mobilization will end in “about two weeks”—likely to free up bureaucratic bandwidth for the normal autumn conscription cycle that will begin on November 1.
- Putin may intend for mobilized personnel to plug gaps in Russia’s frontlines long enough for the autumn conscripts to receive some training and form additional units to improve Russian combat power in 2023.
- Ukrainian and Western officials continue to reiterate that they have observed no indicators of preparations for a Belarusian invasion of Ukraine, despite alarmist reports in the Belarusian information space that President Alexander Lukashenko has introduced a “counter-terrorist operation” regime.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on October 14 that there is currently no additional need for further massive strikes against Ukraine.
- Russian authorities are continuing to engage in “Russification” social programming schemes that target Ukrainian children.
- A prominent Russian milblogger accused unspecified senior officials within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of preparing to censor Russian milbloggers on October 14, but there is no official confirmation of an investigation or prosecution of these milbloggers.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are conducting counteroffensive operations in northeast Kharkiv Oblast east of Kupyansk.
- Russian troops conducted limited ground attacks west of Kreminna in order to regain lost positions.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in northwestern Kherson Oblast in order to regain lost positions.
- Russian troops continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and Donetsk City.
- Russian authorities expressed increasing concern over Ukrainian strikes against Russian rear logistics lines in southern Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing to consolidate control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) through strengthened security measures amid negotiations to establish a nuclear safety and protective zone at the plant.
- Russian officials continued to brand their movement of populations out of Kherson Oblast as recreational “humanitarian trips” rather than evacuations.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 13, 9:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Public reports of the first deaths of ill-prepared mobilized Russian troops in Ukraine have sparked renewed criticism of the Russian military command. Russian media reported that five mobilized men from Chelyabinsk have already died in combat in Ukraine just three weeks after President Vladimir Putin's declaration of partial mobilization on September 21.<sup>[1]</sup> The report led many pro-war milbloggers to claim that the number of dead and wounded among mobilized servicemen is likely higher than this due to lack of promised training, equipment, unit cohesion, and commanders, as well as repeated instances of wrongful mobilization.

Russian milbloggers claimed that Commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD), Mikhail Zusko, ordered the immediate deployment without any pre-combat training of newly mobilized servicemen of the 15th Regiment of the 27th Motor Rifle Brigade from Moscow City and Moscow Oblast to the collapsing frontline around Svatove around October 2nd and 3rd.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian outlets had previously reported that the Kremlin has arrested Zusko due to combat losses, and it is unclear why an SMD commander would issue orders pertaining to a unit within the Western Military District (WMD).<sup>[3]</sup> Milbloggers noted that relatives found half of the 15th Regiment personnel wounded in a Belgorod Oblast hospital after the unit got caught in heavy artillery fire when attempting to reach the Svatove frontline. Milbloggers noted that the regiment had no orders, military command supervision, signal, or supplies, and that the other half of its personnel is still at the Svatove frontline. Another milblogger noted witnessing the coffins of mobilized men arrive in Chelyabinsk, Moscow, and Yekaterinburg, and claimed that many mobilized men are surrendering to Ukrainian forces.<sup>[4]</sup> One Russian milblogger complained on October 13 that newly mobilized men are being deployed in a haphazard way that will lead to 10,000 deaths and 40,000 injuries among them by February 2023.<sup>[5]</sup>

Russian mobilization structures are continuing to face bureaucratic challenges, which may further undermine the combat effectiveness of mobilized personnel. Milbloggers claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) did not set proper conditions to integrate and monitor the deployment of mobilized men at the frontlines.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian military units reportedly disperse mobilized men among different units without keeping proper records of their deployed locations on the frontlines, causing families to complain to military leadership. Russian military officials are also continuing to assign men with previous military experience to units that do not match their expertise. One milblogger even

warned that Russian MoD's inability to properly update families of the whereabouts of their relatives will lead mothers and wives to form human rights groups that "will break Russia from within."<sup>[7]</sup>

ISW cannot independently verify milblogger claims, but the community has been proactive in highlighting the Kremlin's mobilization since the day of its declaration in hopes of improving the prospects of the Russian war in Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> ISW has also previously reported on a video of mobilized men from Moscow Oblast in Svatove who complained about their lack of equipment and deployment to the frontlines without proper training, which corroborates some milblogger reports.<sup>[9]</sup> The persistence of such complaints supports ISW's assessment that the mobilization campaign will not produce enough combat-ready Russian personnel to affect the course of the war in the short term. The Kremlin's rapid deployment of mobilized servicemen to the Kreminna-Svatove line may also indicate that Russian President Vladimir Putin is willing to throw away the lives of mobilized men in a desperate effort to preserve a collapsing frontline.

**The Kremlin continues to struggle to message itself out of the reality of mobilization and military failures.** The Kremlin continued its general pattern of temporarily appeasing the nationalist communities by conducting retaliatory missile strikes on Ukraine in an effort to deflect from persistent mobilization problems. Renewed milblogger critiques about mobilization again show how ephemeral the Kremlin's successes are at deflecting attention from them. The nationalist community resumed its calls on the Kremlin to replace senior officials and commanders and declare war, which some had anticipated would be the Kremlin's response to the Kerch Strait Bridge explosions, broken mobilization process, and loss of most of Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman.<sup>[10]</sup> The Kremlin remains trapped in a cycle of appeasing its pro-war constituencies but retaining Russian President Vladimir Putin's vision of a limited war in Ukraine that is incompatible with their demands and expectations.

**Russian forces continued to launch strikes on critical Ukrainian infrastructure on October**

**13.** Ukraine's Western Air Command noted that Russian forces launched Kalibr cruise missiles at infrastructure in western Ukraine, four of which Ukrainian troops destroyed.<sup>[11]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops launched missile strikes on critical infrastructure and civilian objects in Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv Oblasts throughout the day on October 13.<sup>[12]</sup> Ukrainian military sources also reported that Russian troops continued drone attacks all over Ukraine, and that Ukrainian troops shot down four drones over Vinnytsia and Cherkassy on October 12.<sup>[13]</sup> Social media footage additionally shows explosions in Rivne, Ternopil, Lviv, Chernivtsi Oblasts following the activation of Ukrainian air defense systems.<sup>[14]</sup>

**Russian forces are likely continuing to use Iranian Shahed-136 drones to support massive strike campaigns against critical Ukrainian infrastructure due to their low efficacy in active combat situations.** Ukraine's Southern Operational Command Spokesperson, Nataliya Humenyuk, claimed on October 13 that Russian forces are employing Shahed-136s primarily to strike buildings and infrastructure because the drones have limited efficacy against troop concentrations.

<sup>[15]</sup> Humenyuk cited various sources who stated that Russia has received between 300 to several thousand Shahed-136s and is using them in areas as far away as 1,000km from the launch point, which is why Shahed-136 use has been densely concentrated around southern Ukraine.<sup>[16]</sup> Russian forces are also increasingly trying to launch the drones from the northern border area. Humenyuk's statement, and the pattern of recent Shahed-136 strikes against infrastructure in Ukrainian rear areas, supports ISW's previous assessment that Shahed-136s will not generate asymmetric effects for Russian forces because they are not being used to strike areas of critical military significance in a way that directly influences the frontline.<sup>[17]</sup>

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely continuing efforts to distinguish himself and Wagner Group forces from more conventional Russian and proxy troops.** Prigozhin emphasized in a comment to Russian outlet RIA FAN that Wagner Group forces singlehandedly took control of Ivanhrad, a settlement just south of Bakhmut, on October 13.<sup>[18]</sup> However, the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Territorial Defense Force claimed that Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) and DNR joint forces took control of Ivanhrad and the nearby settlement of Opytne, apparently contradicting Prigozhin's statement that "not a single person from other units, except for employees of the Wagner Private Military Company" was in Ivanhrad at the time of its capture.<sup>[19]</sup> Prigozhin additionally rebutted the claim that Russian forces have taken Opytne and stated that fierce fighting is ongoing on its outskirts.<sup>[20]</sup> The disconnect between Prigozhin's and the DNR Territorial Defense's claims, as well as Prigozhin's apparent desire to have Wagner Group fighters receive sole credit for the capture of Ivanhrad, is consistent with ISW's previous observations that Prigozhin is jockeying for more prominence against the backdrop of his recent harsh critiques of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) establishment.<sup>[21]</sup>

**Increasingly degraded morale, discipline, and combat capabilities among Russian troops in combat zones in Ukraine may be leading to temporary suspensions in offensive operations in**

**limited areas.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that, particularly in Donetsk Oblast, certain Russian units are receiving orders from commanders to temporarily halt offensive operations due to extremely low morale, psychological conditions, high rates of desertion, and non-execution of combat orders.[22] The General Staff statement is likely a reflection of the fact that Russian detachments are becoming increasingly degraded as they impale themselves on relatively small and insignificant settlements throughout Donetsk Oblast, especially around Bakhmut and the Donetsk City area. As these units become more degraded, they are likely reconstituted ad hoc with disparate combat elements, which leads to further demoralization and incoherence in the conduct of offensive operations. However, the apparent suspension of offensive operations in areas of Donetsk Oblast, nearly the only areas in Ukraine where Russian troops are engaged in offensive operations, will further complicate Russian efforts to take additional territory and likely further contribute to poor morale and overall attrition of combat capabilities.

#### Key Takeaways

- Public reports of the first deaths of ill-prepared mobilized Russian troops in Ukraine have sparked renewed criticism of the Russian military command.
- Russian forces continued to launch strikes on critical Ukrainian infrastructure on October 13.
- Increasingly degraded morale, discipline, and combat capabilities among Russian troops in combat zones in Ukraine may be leading to temporary suspensions in offensive operations in limited areas.
- Ukrainian forces made gains northwest of Svatove.
- Russian forces are continuing defensive operations in anticipation of potential Ukrainian attacks towards Kremenna.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Russian troops are attempting to recapture positions in northern and northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Damage to the Kerch Strait Bridge continues to impede the movement of Russian supplies and personnel to southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast and claimed to make marginal advances south of Bakhmut.
- Russian incompetence continues to take its toll on mobilized personnel before they ever reach the front lines, likely exacerbating already-low morale.
- Russian officials are likely increasingly limiting freedom of movement in Russia to preserve additional mobilizable populations and prevent them from fleeing the country.
- Russian occupation officials called for the evacuation of civilians from occupied Kherson Oblast.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 12, 7:45pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russia has seemingly intensified its information operation to falsely portray Ukraine as a terrorist state, likely to set information conditions to counter efforts to designate Russia as a terrorist state. Several Russian sources made unverified claims that Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers detained Ukrainian citizens for allegedly planning "terrorist attacks" in Sverdlovsk, Moscow, and Bryansk oblasts on October 12.[1] Russian milbloggers relatedly amplified rhetoric accusing Ukraine of being a terrorist state and calling for Russian authorities to enhance "counterintelligence" procedures and formally designate Ukraine as a terrorist state.[2] Claims of preparations for alleged and subversive Ukrainian activity in Russia align with a wider attempt to set information conditions to respond to Ukrainian attempts to formally designate Russia a terrorist state, especially in the wake of recent massive attacks on critical Ukrainian infrastructure and residential areas. The Russian information space may also be setting conditions to justify further massive strikes on Ukrainian rear areas; although, as ISW has previously assessed, these tactics are part of the Russian way of war and will likely be utilized regardless of informational conditions.[3] Russian authorities may also be setting conditions for false-flag attacks against Russia framed as Ukrainian-perpetrated acts of terrorism.

**Russian forces may have brought Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated personnel to occupied areas in Ukraine to train Russian troops in the use of Shahed-136 drones.** The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on October 12 that Russian forces brought an unspecified number of Iranian instructors to Dzankoi in Crimea and Zalizniy Port and Hladivtsi in Kherson Oblast to teach Russian forces how to use Shahed-136 attack drones.<sup>[4]</sup> The Resistance Center stated that the Iranian instructors directly control the launch of drones on civilian targets in Ukraine, including in Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts.<sup>[5]</sup> The IRGC is notably the primary operator of Iran's drone inventory, so these Iranian instructors are likely IRGC or IRGC-affiliated personnel.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russia is intensifying efforts to set information conditions to falsely portray Ukraine as a terrorist state to deflect recent calls to designate Russia as a terrorist state.
- Russian forces may have imported Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated personnel to occupied areas in Ukraine to train Russian troops in the use of Shahed-136 drones.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops continued counteroffensive operations toward Svatove and Kreminna. Russian forces are continuing defensive operations in this area.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are conducting ground attacks in northwestern and western Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian forces are likely reinforcing the frontline in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian military continues to face problems equipping individual Russian soldiers with basic personal equipment.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continue to employ coercive measures against residents in Russian-occupied territories.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 11**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 11, 8:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted massive missile strikes across Ukraine for the second day in a row on October 11.** The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces fired nearly 30 Kh-101 and Kh-55 cruise missiles from Tu-95 and Tu-160 strategic bombers and damaged critical infrastructure in Lviv, Vinnytsia, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian air defense reportedly destroyed 21 cruise missiles and 11 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).<sup>[2]</sup> Social media footage shows the aftermath of strikes throughout Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces additionally continued to launch attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure with Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones.<sup>[4]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defense destroyed eight Shahed-136 drones in Mykolaiv Oblast on the night of October 10 and 11.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Army General Sergey Surovikin's previous experience as commander of Russian Armed Forces in Syria likely does not explain the massive wave of missile strikes across Ukraine over the past few days, nor does it signal a change in the trajectory of Russian capabilities or strategy in Ukraine.** Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative, Andriy Yusov, linked the recent strikes to Surovikin's appointment as theatre commander and stated on October 11 that "throwing rockets at civilian infrastructure objects" is consistent with Surovikin's tactics in Syria.<sup>[6]</sup> However, Surovikin has been serving in Ukraine (as the Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces and then reportedly of the southern grouping of Russian forces) since the beginning of the war, as have many senior Russian commanders similarly associated with Russian operations in Syria.<sup>[7]</sup> Army General Aleksandr Dvornikov, who was appointed in April to the role that Surovikin now holds, similarly commanded Russian forces in Syria between 2015-2016 and became known for deliberately and brutally targeting civilians.<sup>[8]</sup> Colonel General Aleksandr Chayko, the former commander of the Eastern Military District who took an active part in the first stages of the war in Ukraine, also served as Chief of Staff of Russian forces in Syria from 2015 and into 2016.<sup>[9]</sup> As ISW noted in April, all Russian military district, aerospace, and airborne commanders served at least one tour in Syria as either chief of staff or commander of Russian forces, and Russian forces deliberately targeted civilian

infrastructure including hospitals and breadlines throughout the period of Russia's active engagement in that war.[10] Disregard for international law and an enthusiasm for brutalizing civilian populations was standard operating procedure for Russian forces in Syria before, during, and after Surovikin's tenure. It has become part of the Russian way of war.

**Surovikin's appointment will not lead to further "Syrianization" of Russian operations in Ukraine because the battlespace in Ukraine is fundamentally different from the battlespace in Syria, and direct comparisons to Surovikin's Syrian "playbook" obfuscate the fact that Russia faces very different challenges in Ukraine.** Russia cannot further "Syrianize" the war largely because of its failure to gain air superiority, which precludes its ability to launch the kind of massive carpet-bombing campaigns across Ukraine that it could, and did, conduct in Syria. ISW has previously assessed that Russian air operations would have been markedly different if conducted in contested airspace or a more challenging air-defense environment, as is the case in Ukraine.[11] It is therefore highly unlikely that Surovikin's role as theatre commander will cause a fundamental change in Russian air and missile operations in Ukraine as long as Ukraine's Western backers continue to supply Kyiv with the air defenses needed to prevent Russia from gaining air superiority.

**Russian military officials may instead have coordinated Surovikin's appointment and the October 10 cruise missile strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure to rehabilitate the perception of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).** Whoever was appointed as theatre commander would have overseen the October 10 cruise missile strikes, which Ukrainian intelligence reported had been planned as early as October 2 (and which Surovikin certainly did not plan, prepare for, and conduct on the day of his appointment).[12] Russian milbloggers have recently lauded both the massive wave of strikes on October 10 and Surovikin's appointment and correlated the two as positive developments for Russian operations in Ukraine. This narrative may be aligned with ongoing Russian information operations to rehabilitate the reputation of Central Military District Command Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin following Russian failures around Lyman as part of a wider campaign to bolster public opinion of the Russian military establishment. The Russian MoD is evidently invested in repairing its public image, and the informational effects of the October 10 missile strikes and the appointment of Surovikin, a hero in the extremist nationalist Russian information space, are likely intended to cater to the most vocal voices in that space.

**The Russian Federation is likely extracting ammunition and other materiel from Belarusian storage bases—activity that is incompatible with setting conditions for a large-scale Russian or Belarusian ground attack against Ukraine from Belarus.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on October 11 that a train with 492 tons of ammunition from the Belarusian 43rd Missile and Ammunition Storage Arsenal in Gomel arrived at the Kirovskaya Railway Station in Crimea on an unspecified recent past date.[13] The GUR reported that Belarusian officials plan to send an additional 13 trains with weapons, equipment, ammunition, and other unspecified materiel from five different Belarusian bases to the Kamenska (Kamensk-Shakhtinsky) and Marchevo (Taganrog) railway stations in Rostov Oblast on an unspecified future date. Open-source social media footage supports this report. Geolocated footage showed at least two Belarusian trains transporting Belarusian T-72 tanks and Ural military trucks in Minsk and Tor-M2 surface-to-air missile launchers in Orsha (Vitebsk Oblast) on October 11.[14] Belarusian equipment movements into Russia indicate that Russian and Belarusian forces likely are not establishing assembly areas in Belarus. Belarusian equipment and supply movements to Crimea and Rostov Oblast indicate that Russian forces are less confident about the security of Russian ground lines of communication running through northern and western Luhansk Oblast given the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive there. Ukraine's General Staff reiterated that it monitors Belarus and has not observed indicators of the formation of offensive groups in Belarus on October 11.[15] Russian and or Belarusian forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine from Belarus, as ISW has previously assessed.[16]

Belarus remains a co-belligerent in Russia's war against Ukraine, nonetheless. Belarus materially supports Russian offensives in Ukraine and provides Russian forces with havens from which to attack Ukraine with precision munitions. Russian forces struck Kyiv with Shahed-136 drones launched from Belarusian territory on October 10.[17] The GUR additionally reported that Russia deployed 32 Shahed-136 drones to Belarus as of October 10 and that Russia will deploy eight more to Belarus by October 14.[18]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces conducted massive missile strikes across Ukraine for the second day in a row.**
- **Army General Sergey Surovikin's previous experience as commander of Russian Armed Forces in Syria is likely unrelated to the massive wave of missile strikes across Ukraine**

over the past few days, nor does it signal a change in the trajectory of Russian capabilities or strategy in Ukraine.

- The Russian Federation is likely extracting ammunition and other materiel from Belarusian storage bases, which is incompatible with the notion that Russian forces are setting conditions for a ground attack against Ukraine from Belarus.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensives east of the Oskil River and in the direction of Kremnna-Svatove.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops continued ground attacks in northern and western Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces are continuing an interdiction campaign to target Russian military, technical, and logistics assets and concentration areas in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian reporting of explosions in Dzhankoy, Crimea, indicated panic over losing further logistics capabilities in Crimea following the Kerch Strait Bridge explosion.
- Russian federal subjects are announcing new extensions and phases of mobilization in select regions, which may indicate that they have not met their mobilization quotas.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continue to conduct filtration activities in Russian-occupied territories.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 10

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 10, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces conducted a massive missile strike attack against over 20 cities, including Kyiv, on October 10. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched over 84 cruise missiles and 24 drone attacks, 13 of which were carried out with Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones. [1] Ukrainian air defense shot down 43 cruise missiles, 10 Shahed-136 drones, and 3 unspecified drones. Russian forces launched missiles from 10 strategic bombers operating in the Caspian Sea and from Nizhny Novgorod, Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems, and 6 missile carriers in the Black Sea. [2] Russian forces launched the Shahed-136 drones from Crimea and Belarus. [3] Ukrainian media reported that Russian missile strikes hit 70 targets, including 29 critical infrastructure facilities, 4 high-rise buildings, 35 residential buildings, and a school. [4]

Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed to have ordered the missile strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure in retaliation for a “terrorist act” at the Kerch Strait Bridge, likely in part to curry favor with the Russian pro-war nationalist camp that has been demanding such retaliation. [5] Putin accused Ukraine during his meeting with the Russian Security Council of conducting terrorist acts against Russian civilian and critical infrastructure, namely against the Kerch Strait Bridge, the Kursk Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), and segments of the Turkish Stream gas transmission system. [6] Ukrainian officials have not formally taken responsibility for the explosion at the Kerch Strait Bridge. [7] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) also reported that Putin has been planning this attack prior to the Kerch Strait Bridge explosion, and if true, could indicate that Putin planned this attack for the deflection of the Kharkiv-Izyum-Lyman failures. [8]

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu also attended the meeting despite speculations that Putin would force him to resign, which may suggest that Putin settled on responding to only one of the pro-war community’s demands at this time.

Putin emphasized that he would conduct proportional escalation in any future retaliatory actions. He stated that if Ukraine continues to carry out “terrorist attacks against [Russian] territory, then Russian responses will be harsh, and their scale will correspond to the level of the threat to the Russian Federation.” This declaration of proportionality suggests that Putin intends to continue climbing the escalation ladder rung by rung and cautiously rather than jumping to more dramatic measures such as the use of nuclear weapons. Putin may also mean to message the Russian pro-war camp that they should manage their expectations of an ongoing daily bombardment of Ukraine similar to the one conducted today. [9] Russian milbloggers, for their part, have overwhelmingly welcomed the strikes and amplified Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev’s statement that more attacks against Ukraine will follow soon. [10] Ukrainian and Western intelligence have previously reported that Russia has spent a significant portion of its high-precision missiles, and Putin

likely knows better than Medvedev or the milbloggers that he cannot sustain attacks of this intensity for very long.[11]

**The October 10 Russian attacks wasted some of Russia's dwindling precision weapons against civilian targets, as opposed to militarily significant targets.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces successfully completed the mission of striking Ukrainian military command centers, signal infrastructure, and energy systems in Ukraine.[12] Social media shows that Russians instead hit a children's playground, a park, a German consulate, and a business center among other non-military targets.[13] Ukrainian air defenses also shot down half of the Russian drones and cruise missiles. Russian attacks on the Ukrainian energy grid will not likely break Ukraine's will to fight, but Russia's use of its limited supply of precision weapons in this role may deprive Putin of options to disrupt ongoing Ukrainian counter-offensives in Kherson and Luhansk Oblasts.

**Russian and Belarusian forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine from the north despite Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's October 10 announcement that Belarus and Russia agreed to deploy the Union State's Regional Grouping of Forces (RGV) —a strategic formation of Russian and Belarusian units tasked with defending the Union State.** Lukashenko stated that he and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed on October 7 on an unspecified "deployment" of the Russian-Belarusian RGV in "connection with the escalation on the western borders of the Union State" but did not clearly define the deployment's parameters.[14] Lukashenko stated that over a thousand Russian personnel will deploy to Belarus and that a Russian-Belarusian group began forming on October 8.[15] The Russian component of any RGV formations in Belarus will likely be comprised of low-readiness mobilized men or conscripts who likely will not pose a significant conventional military threat to Ukraine.

The Russian component of the RGV is comprised of elements of the 1st Guard Tank Army, 20th Combined Arms Army, and airborne units—formations that have all sustained heavy combat losses in Ukraine and have a severely reduced combat capacity.[16] A *Kyiv Post* reporter claimed that Russian soldiers are deploying to Belarus en masse via cattle railcars without mechanized equipment on October 10—a characterization consistent with ISW's assessment.[17] ISW has previously assessed that Ukrainian reports from late September of Belarus preparing to accept 20,000 mobilized Russian men indicate that Russia hopes to use Belarusian military facilities and infrastructure to hold and potentially train newly mobilized Russian forces, but that it remains exceedingly unlikely that these are leading indicators of imminent Belarusian involvement in Ukraine on Russia's behalf.[18] The Kremlin may seek to use additional Russian forces in Belarus to fix Ukrainian forces near Kyiv and prevent their redeployment elsewhere to participate in counter-offensives. ISW has previously assessed that Lukashenko cannot afford the domestic ramifications of Belarusian involvement in Ukraine.[19] ISW also assesses that Russia does not have the ability to form a ground strike force from scratch or from existing units in Belarus quickly. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that it has not observed indicators of Russian forces forming offensive groups in Belarus and explicitly stated "there is no threat of an attack from the territory of the Republic of Belarus as of October 10." [20]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces conducted massive, coordinated missile strikes on over 20 Ukrainian cities.
- President Vladimir Putin claimed that the coordinated missile strikes were in retaliation for the explosion on the Kerch Strait Bridge, likely in part to curry favor with "pro-war" factions.
- Russian and Belarusian ground forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine from Belarusian territory to the north.
- Ukrainian forces have likely liberated over 200 square kilometers of territory in western Luhansk Oblast as of October 10.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful attempts to regain recently lost territory in northwest Kherson Oblast while reinforcing nearby positions with damaged and hastily mobilized units.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian and occupation administration officials are setting conditions to move up to 40,000 residents out of Kherson Oblast to Russian-occupied Crimea and the Russian Federation.
- Russian forces cannot supply mobilized forces, likely due to years of supply theft by contract soldiers and commanders.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 9**

[Click here to read the full report](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

October 9, 9:35 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

This campaign assessment special edition focuses on Russian domestic responses to the Kerch Strait Bridge explosion on October 9 and changes within the Russian chain of command. Ukrainian forces continued to make advances towards Svatove-Kremenna highway on October 9. Those developments are summarized briefly and will be covered in more detail tomorrow.

The attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge, coupled with recent Russian military failures and partial mobilization, is generating direct criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin from the Russian pro-war nationalist community. Some milbloggers, who represent and speak to that community on Telegram, criticized Putin's and the Kremlin's failure to address major events forthrightly, noting that it is challenging to rally behind Putin when his government relies on secrecy. [1] Others noted that Putin has consistently failed to address incidents such as the sinking of the cruiser *Moskva* or the prisoner exchange of Azovstal fighters whom the Kremlin had consistently demonized since the Battle of Mariupol.[2] Some milbloggers said that Putin must retaliate for the explosion on the Kerch Strait Bridge lest his silence be perceived as "weakness." [3] Milbloggers who did not criticize Putin instead criticized Russian Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev's silence following the explosion after he had made several public claims that an attack on the Crimean Bridge was a Russian "red line." [4] Direct criticism of Putin from this community is almost unprecedented. Milbloggers and other nationalist figures continue to express overwhelming support for Putin's goals in Ukraine and have hitherto blamed failures and setbacks on the Russian military command or the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).

**These critiques from the pro-war camp may indicate rising doubts about Putin's ability to deliver on his promised goal of "denazifying" Ukraine and may undermine Putin's appeal within his core constituency.** Putin's stated objectives for the invasion he launched on February 24 deeply resonated with the nationalist community, which firmly subscribes to the ideology of Russia's historic and cultural superiority and right to control over the territories of the former Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. Recent military failures have caused some milbloggers to become concerned about Putin's commitment to that ideology, however, with some milbloggers even accusing him of failing to uphold the ideology even prior to the full-scale invasion in February 2022. One milblogger noted on October 7 his disgust with the Russian political elite, including Putin, for consistently failing to seize Ukraine after the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 and for conducting an "ugly special military operation" that only further united Ukrainians and the West against Russia.[5]

#### Key inflection in ongoing military operations on October 9:

- Ukrainian forces continued to advance east of the Oskil River in the direction of Luhansk Oblast and have entered Stel'makhivka (about 18km west of Svatove).[27] Russian forces launched unsuccessful assaults on Burdaka on the Kharkiv Oblast-Russian border, and Terny northeast of Lyman.[28]
- Russian sources reported that Russian forces attempted to attack in the direction of Ternovi Pody (approximately 30km northwest of Kherson City) [29] Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces continued to target newly liberated settlements in northern Kherson Oblast with artillery, MLRS, and aviation.[30]
- Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces repelled over 30 attacks in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas.[31] Russian forces launched an unsuccessful assault southwest of Donetsk City.[32]
- Russian forces targeted residential areas of Zaporizhzhia City with cruise missiles.[33]
- A Russian milblogger accused North Ossetia and Vladikavkaz of failing to fulfill mobilization orders due to carelessness and the personal interests of regional officials.[34]
- Ukrainian sources reported that Russian occupation authorities are moving their families from Kherson Oblast to Crimea, and from Starobilsk to Luhansk City.[35]

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

October 8, 10:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**A large-scale explosion damaged the Kerch Strait Bridge that links occupied Crimea with Russia on October 8.** Maxar satellite imagery shows that the explosion collapsed one lane of the road bridge and damaged the nearby railway track.<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian Investigative Committee stated that a truck exploded on the bridge and ignited seven fuel tanks on the railroad.<sup>[2]</sup> A small fraction of Russian milbloggers speculated that Ukrainian saboteurs used a boat to detonate the bridge from the sea, though there is no visible evidence for such a conclusion.<sup>[3]</sup> The Kremlin refrained from accusing Ukraine of sabotage or attack, echoing similar restraint following the sinking of the cruiser *Moskva* and the Ukrainian strike on Saky airfield in Crimea.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukraine did not claim responsibility for the incident, but *The New York Times* reported that an unnamed senior Ukrainian official stated that Ukrainian intelligence participated in the explosion.<sup>[5]</sup> Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov noted that the Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a government commission composed of government officials, security services, and the Ministry of Emergency Situations to investigate the "emergency."<sup>[6]</sup>

**The explosion will not permanently disrupt critical Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Crimea, but its aftermath is likely to increase friction in Russian logistics for some time.** The road bridge appears at least partially operational, and the railroad bridge did not suffer significant structural damage according to Russian reports that generally seem plausible based on the available video evidence. Russian footage shows people walking on the damaged road bridge and a train moving on the railroad bridge.<sup>[7]</sup> The Head of occupied Crimea Sergey Aksyonov claimed that the remaining lane of the road bridge opened to cars and buses after a rigorous security check, but that trucks must move by ferry.<sup>[8]</sup> The collapsed lane of the road bridge will restrict Russian military movements until it is repaired, forcing some Russian forces to rely on the ferry connection for some time. Russian forces will likely still be able to transport heavy military equipment via the railroad. Russian officials will likely intensify security checks on all vehicles crossing the bridge, however, adding delays to the movement of Russian military equipment, personnel, and supplies to Crimea. Putin has already signed a decree strengthening the security protocol on the bridge under the supervision of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).<sup>[9]</sup>

**The Kremlin is likely continuing to frame the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as the scapegoat for the Kerch Bridge explosion and other Russian military failures to deflect the blame from Putin.** The Russian MoD has not issued an official statement regarding the incident as of this publication.<sup>[10]</sup> Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported that the Russian Presidential Administration sent out a guide to Russian mass media on the appropriate way to downplay the severity of the damage to the bridge, and it is possible that the Kremlin has ordered the Russian MoD to remain quiet regarding the situation.<sup>[11]</sup> Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov stated that Russia must initiate a strike campaign on critical Ukrainian infrastructure instead of listening to Russian MoD promises.<sup>[12]</sup>

**Some nationalist voices noted that Putin and his close circle are failing to immediately address the attack on a symbolic bridge, voicing direct criticism of Putin for the first time.** A milblogger warned that if Putin fails to undertake retaliatory actions it "will be mistaken for the weakness of the president himself."<sup>[13]</sup> Another milblogger noted that it is hypocritical for the Kremlin to call on Russians to rally behind Putin if he is unable to comment on significant events such as the *Moskva* sinking, prisoner exchanges including Azovstal fighters, or the collapse of the Kharkiv frontline.<sup>[14]</sup> Others criticized the silence of Russian Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev regarding the explosion, given that Medvedev had made several statements defining any attacks on the Kerch Bridge as a violation of Russian "red lines."<sup>[15]</sup> Russian milbloggers and propagandists alike called on the Kremlin to resume strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure and notably did not make any calls for Russia to use tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine.

**Ukrainian and Russian sources claimed that the Kremlin targeted some higher military command figures following the Kerch Bridge explosion, but these reports remain unverified as of this publication.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Kremlin detained, arrested, and blocked unspecified military officials and ordered the units of the elite Dzerzhinsky Separate Operation Purpose Division to enter Moscow on October 8.<sup>[16]</sup> Milbloggers who favor the Wagner Group claimed that the Kremlin has replaced Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov supposedly with Tula Governor Alexey Dyumin and the deputy commander-in-chief of the ground forces, Lieutenant General Alexander Matovnikov, respectfully.<sup>[17]</sup> ISW cannot independently verify either of these reports at this time.

The Kremlin named the Russian Commander of the Aerospace Forces, Army General Sergey Surovikin, the new commander of the Russian operation in Ukraine, and this appointment has generated positive feedback within the nationalist community. Sorovikin previously commanded the “southern” group of forces in Ukraine and was reportedly responsible for the capture of Lysychansk in July.[18] Milbloggers shared their excitement regarding Surovikin’s appointment, noting that Surovikin has the “tough” character necessary to regain the initiative in Ukraine.[19] Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin extravagantly praised Surovikin because he “got into a tank and rushed to save” the Soviet Union during the 1991 coup attempt in Moscow.[20] Prigozhin’s interview further confirmed reports of a fissure between pro-war and “liberal” factions within the Kremlin, which ISW will consider in more detail in subsequent reports.

#### Key Takeaways

- A large-scale explosion seriously damaged the Kerch Strait Bridge that links occupied Crimea with Russia.
- The Kremlin named the Russian Commander of the Aerospace Forces, Army General Sergey Surovikin, the new commander of the Russian operation in Ukraine, and this appointment has generated positive feedback within the nationalist community.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in Kharkiv and Luhansk Oblasts.
- Russian forces continued establishing defensive positions in northern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to attack settlements around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and west of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly continued to shoot down Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones.
- Russian federal subjects are facing financial challenges in funding mobilization.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continued measures to remove Ukrainian children from their homes in Russian-occupied territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 7

**Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan**

October 7, 9:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Western and Russian reports of fractures within the Kremlin are gaining traction within the Russian information space, undermining the appearance of stability of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime.** *The Washington Post* reported that US intelligence obtained information that a member of Putin’s inner circle directly criticized Putin’s “extensive military shortcomings” during the war in Ukraine, and other Western and Kremlin-affiliated officials noted rising criticism of Putin’s mishandling of the war and mobilization.[1] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov acknowledged that there have been debates in the Kremlin regarding mobilization in a statement to *The Washington Post* but denied all allegations of a member of the Kremlin confronting Putin. ISW cannot verify any of these reports are real or assess the likelihood that these arguments or fractures will change Putin’s mind about continuing the war, let alone if they will destabilize his regime. Word of fractures within Putin’s inner circle have reached the hyper-patriotic and nationalist milblogger crowd, however, undermining the impression of strength and control that Putin has sought to portray throughout his reign.

Some Russian milbloggers have begun speculating that there are two factions within the Kremlin following Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Private Military Company financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s harsh criticism of the Russian higher military command.[2] A milblogger told his nearly one million readers that Kadyrov and Prigozhin are part of the faction that seeks to continue the war and accomplish its ideological goals regardless of cost. The milblogger noted that the faction opposed to them consisted of government officials who wish to negotiate with the West to save their assets and residences in the West but are too afraid to confront Putin directly. The milblogger expressed hope that the pro-war faction will defeat the faction that fails to see that Russia cannot afford to end the war.

The presentation of fundamental disagreements within Putin’s inner circle and challenges to his decisions, even if quiet, within the Russian nationalist space risks depicting Putin as weak and not fully in control of his government. The truth or falseness of that presentation is less important than its injection into the audiences on which Putin most relies for continued support in his war. Putin himself may have externalized his own concerns about this break in the façade of his power and of the

unanimity of his trusted senior officials in an odd exchange with a teacher on October 5.[3] Putin asked the teacher how he taught his students about the causes of the Pugachev Rebellion that challenged Catherine the Great in the mid-1770s.[4] The teacher, from Izhevsk, one of the towns that Pugachev captured during his revolt, offered answers that did not satisfy Putin, including the observation that the rebellion had occurred because of the appearance of “a leader who could capitalize on a wave of dissatisfaction,” and that the lesson to be drawn from that episode of history was “that it is necessary to respect the views of other members of society.” Putin offered his own answer: “The leader [Pugachev] claimed to be tsar. And how did that arise? Why was that possible?...Because of the element of weakening of the central power.”[5] The exchange was bizarre and fascinating since there is no reason Pugachev’s Rebellion should have been on Putin’s mind at this time, nor any reason for him to worry about someone else “claiming to be tsar.”—unless, of course, Putin himself perceives a weakening of the central power, i.e., himself.[6]

**Kadyrov and Prigozhin will likely attempt to make minor ground advances in Donetsk Oblast to maintain their prominence and reputation in the nationalist and proxy information**

**spaces.** Russian forces have been making incremental advances around Bakhmut and Avdiivka between October 6 and October 7, likely with the support of Wagner and Kadyrov’s elements in the area. Some milbloggers and Ukrainian officials reported that Prigozhin committed 1,000 of his troops to strengthen positions in Lysychansk to secure Russian frontlines following the collapse of the Lyman frontline.[7] Head of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Denis Pushilin even awarded Kadyrov the title of hero of the DNR.[8] The claims about Kadyrov and Prigozhin making gains and preparing to save the day coincides with Kremlin efforts to improve the reputation of the Commander of the Central Military District, Colonel-General Alexander Lapin whom they both attacked earlier.[9] Milbloggers even reported meeting Lapin, who is now reportedly commanding the Svatove-Kremenna frontline in Luhansk Oblast.[10]

**Russian President Vladimir Putin may have waited to announce that he had replaced Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Aleksandr Chaiko until Putin could use Chaiko as a scapegoat for Russian military failures in Kharkiv and Lyman.** Russian media reported on October 7 that Putin replaced Chaiko with Lieutenant General Rustam Muradov. Chaiko is the second military district commander to be replaced since the Russian lines in Kharkiv collapsed—Putin replaced the Western Military District commander on October 3, as ISW previously reported. [11] Oddly, Russian milbloggers first reported that Muradov had replaced Chaiko on September 4, but the Kremlin has yet to formally confirm the appointment.[12] State-run and independent media outlets quoted the governor of Dagestan congratulating Muradov on his appointment and cited an entry in the Unified State Register of Legal Entities to confirm the replacement.[13] Muradov had previously commanded the eastern grouping of Russian forces in Ukraine, which is likely comprised of elements of the EMD, as of July.[14]

**Key Takeaways**

- **Western and Russian reports of fractures within the Kremlin are gaining traction within the Russian information space, undermining the appearance of stability of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin may have waited to announce that he had replaced Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Aleksandr Chaiko until he needed to use Chaiko as a scapegoat for Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman, Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian forces likely continued counteroffensive operations along the Kremminna-Svatove road in western Luhansk Oblast.**
- **Russian forces continued to establish defensive positions in northern Kherson Oblast, and Ukrainian and Russian sources reported ongoing battles north and northwest of Kherson City.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Anecdotal reports of poor conditions for mobilized personnel in the Russian information space are continuing to fuel the accurate narrative of Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) incompetence.**
- **Russian officials offered basic concessions for mobilized men and their families on October 7 but continue to rely on local governments and other non-federal institutions to provide support, including food and training, to newly mobilized men.**
- **Russian occupation authorities in Donetsk Oblast are continuing to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian civilians, belying Russian claims that residents of newly-annexed territories will not be mobilized.**

- Ukrainian officials in newly liberated Kharkiv Oblast continue to uncover Russian torture chambers and other human rights abuses.
- Russian occupation officials have likely failed to repair necessary civilian infrastructure in occupied and illegally-annexed parts of Ukraine in time for winter as temperatures drop.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

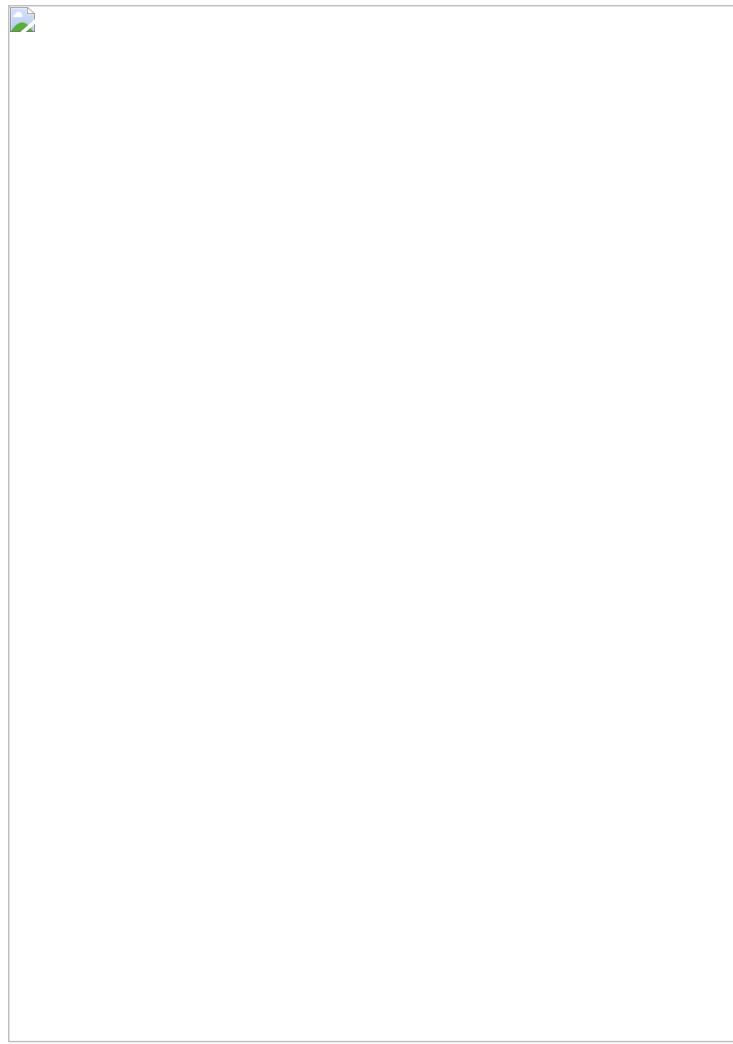
October 6, 6:15pm ET

Russia's use of Iranian-made drones is not generating asymmetric effects the way the Ukrainian use of US-provided HIMARS systems has done and is unlikely to affect the course of the war significantly. The deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, stated on October 6 that Russian forces have used a total of 86 Iranian Shahed-136 drones against Ukraine, 60% of which Ukrainian forces have already destroyed.[1] As ISW reported yesterday, Russian forces do not appear to be focusing these drones on asymmetric nodes near the battlefield. They have used many drones against civilian targets in rear areas, likely hoping to generate nonlinear effects through terror. Such efforts are not succeeding. Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Yuri Ignat stated that the Russian army is increasingly using the Iranian-made drones to conserve its stock of high-precision missiles.[2] Russian forces have likely used a non-trivial percentage of the Shahed-136 supply so far if the claims of an anonymous US intelligence official at the end of August were correct that Iran would likely provide "hundreds" of drones to Russia.[3]

The Wagner Private Military Company announced the creation of its own private Telegram channel on October 6, indicating that Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may want a voice that is clearly his own to compete with milbloggers and possibly Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, who all have their own Telegram channels. A Telegram channel affiliated with Prigozhin shared the invitation to the Wagner channel, "Peacekeeper." The Russian-language invitation reads "We arrived from Hell. We are WAGNER - our business is death, and business is going well."[4] In addition to Peacekeeper, the channel suggested that followers subscribe to the "Novorossiya Z Project," another private channel. The creation of a group for Wagner to share "uncensored materials from the front" may be in part a recruitment tool but is likely also an attempt to establish a formal means for Prigozhin and his allies to directly influence the information space in much the same way that Kadyrov and the Russian nationalist milbloggers use Telegram.

### Key Takeaways

- Russia's use of Iranian-made drones is not generating asymmetric effects the way the Ukrainian use of US-provided HIMARS systems has done and is unlikely to affect the course of the war significantly.
- The Wagner Private Military Company announced the creation of its own private Telegram channel on October 6, indicating that Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may want a voice that is clearly his own to compete with milbloggers and possibly Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, who all have their own Telegram channels.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued counteroffensive operations in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast near Kupyansk and operations to threaten Russian positions along the Kremminna-Svatove road in western Luhansk Oblast on October 6.
- Russian troops are likely establishing defensive positions in upper Kherson Oblast following the collapse of the Russian line in northeast Kherson.
- Russian troops continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on October 6 and likely made incremental gains around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued to conduct routine artillery, air, and missile strikes west of Hulyaipole, and in Dnipropetrovsk and Mykolaiv Oblasts on October 6.
- Local Russian officials appear to be frantically looking for ways to fund their mobilized units as the Kremlin increasingly expects local administrations to pay for the war effort from their own budgets.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on October 6 that Russian forces began the forced mobilization of Ukrainian citizens in Russian-occupied Kremminna and Starobilsk, Luhansk Oblast.



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 5

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 5, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukraine's northern Kharkiv counteroffensive has not yet culminated after one month of successful operations and is now advancing into western Luhansk Oblast. Ukrainian forces captured Hrekhivka and Makiivka in western Luhansk Oblast (approximately 20 km southwest of Svatove) on October 5.[1] Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Ukrainian forces have begun liberating unspecified villages in Luhansk Oblast on October 5.[2] Ukrainian forces began the maneuver phase of their counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast—which has now reached Luhansk Oblast—on September 6.[3] Russian forces have failed to hold the banks of the Oskil and Siverskyi Donets rivers and leverage them as natural boundaries to prevent Ukrainian forces from projecting into vulnerable sections of Russian-occupied northeast Ukraine. The terrain in western Luhansk is suitable for the kind of rapid maneuver warfare that Ukrainian forces used effectively in eastern Kharkiv Oblast in early September, and there are no indications from open sources that the Russian military has substantially reinforced western Luhansk Oblast. Ukraine's ongoing northern and southern counteroffensives are likely forcing the Kremlin to prioritize the defense of one area of operations at the expense of another, potentially increasing the likelihood of Ukrainian success in both.

Russian forces conducted a Shahed-136 drone strike against Bila Tserkva, Kyiv Oblast, on October 5, the first Russian strike in Kyiv Oblast since June.[4] Footage from the aftermath of the

strike shows apparent damage to residential structures.[5] Russian milbloggers lauded the destructive capability of the Shahed-136 drones but questioned why Russian forces are using such technology to target areas deep in the Ukrainian rear and far removed from active combat zones. That decision fits into the larger pattern of Russian forces expending high-precision technology on areas of Ukraine that hold limited operational significance.[6]

**Russian President Vladimir Putin took measures to assert full Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).** Putin issued a decree transferring control of the ZNPP to Russian state company Rosenergoatom on October 5.[7] The ZNPP's current Ukrainian operator Energoatom announced that its president assumed the position of General Director of the ZNPP on October 5.[8] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian officials are coercing ZNPP workers into obtaining Russian passports and signing employment contracts with Rosenergoatom. [9] International Atomic Energy Agency General Director Rafael Grossi plans to meet with both Ukrainian and Russian officials this week in Kyiv and Moscow to discuss the creation of a "protective zone" around the ZNPP.[10] Russian officials will likely attempt to coerce the IAEA in upcoming discussions and negotiations into recognizing Rosenergoatom's official control of the ZNPP, and by implication Russia's illegal annexation of Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

**The head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, announced that Putin awarded him the rank of colonel general on October 5.**[11] This promotion is particularly noteworthy in the context of the recent controversy surrounding Kadyrov and his direct criticism of Central Military District (CMD) Colonel General Aleksander Lapin, which ISW has previously analyzed.[12] Although ISW has not found official confirmation of Kadyrov's promotion, Putin may have made the decision to elevate Kadyrov's rank in order to maintain the support of Kadyrov and Chechen forces while simultaneously pushing back on the Russian Ministry of Defense and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, from whom Putin seems to be rhetorically distancing himself. Kadyrov's new rank may be a sign that Putin is willing to appease the more radical and vocal calls of the *siloviki* base at the expense of the conventional military establishment.

**Increasing domestic critiques of Russia's "partial mobilization" are likely driving Putin to scapegoat the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and specifically Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.** Putin deferred mobilization for all students, including part-time and masters students, via a decree on October 5.[13] Putin told Russian outlets that because "the Ministry of Defense did not make timely changes to the legal framework on the list of those who are not subject to mobilization, adjustments have to be made." [14] That direct critique of the MoD is also an implicit critique of Shoigu, whom Putin appears to be setting up to take the fall for the failures of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The chairperson of the Russian State Duma Defense Committee, Colonel General (Ret.) Andrey Kartapolov, also criticized the MoD on Russian state television on October 5. Kartapolov said that all Russians know the MoD is lying and must stop, but that message is not reaching "individual leaders," another jab at Shoigu.[15] One Russian milblogger claimed that Kartapolov's comments demonstrate that Shoigu will soon be "demolished" and "recognized as the main culprit" of Russia's military failures. The milblogger reminded his readers that it was the Russian MoD and its head that made an "invaluable and huge contribution to the fact that we are now on the verge of a military-political catastrophe." [16] Another milblogger defended Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Chechen head Ramzan Kadyrov for criticizing the MoD, applauding them for driving necessary change. [17] Kadyrov's announcement that Putin awarded him the rank of Colonel-General is similarly indicative that Putin is willing to appease the *siloviki* base that has taken continued rhetorical swings at the MoD establishment.

Putin will likely hold off on firing Shoigu for as long as he feels he can in order to continue to blame Shoigu for ongoing military failures and to build up support among other factions. Shoigu's replacement will need to take responsibility for failures that occur after his tenure begins. Putin is already working to improve his support among the nationalist milbloggers and the *siloviki* such as Prigozhin and Kadyrov. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters on October 5 that Prigozhin "makes a great contribution within his capabilities" to efforts in Russia and Ukraine and declined to answer questions surrounding Prigozhin's critiques of government officials.[18] A milblogger emphasized on October 5 that Putin "regularly hosts military correspondents, carefully reads their reports, asks the right questions, and receives objective answers," implicitly contrasting that relationship with the dishonest way in which milbloggers believe the MoD interacts with Putin.[19]

**Russian authorities detained the manager of several milblogger telegram channels on October 5, indicating that the Kremlin is likely setting limits on what criticism is allowed in the domestic Russian information space.** Alexander Khunshtein, the deputy secretary of the General Council of Putin's political party, United Russia, published footage on October 5 showing Russian authorities detaining Alexei Slobodenyuk.[20] Slobodenyuk is an employee of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's Patriot media group and the manager of several milblogger telegrams, the most prominent

of which are “Release Z Kraken” and “Skaner.” The telegram channel “Skaner” has featured criticism of major state officials and military personnel, the most prominent of whom are Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, and Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov. Russian authorities detained Slobodenyuk on accusations of fraud. His detention suggests that the Kremlin is attempting to set boundaries for which criticism is allowed in the information space and on which high-ranking officials milbloggers and journalists can criticize—Defense Minister Shoigu, Putin’s likely scapegoat-in-waiting, now appears to be fair game, whereas officials close to Putin such as Lavrov and Putin’s spokesperson are off-limits.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian counteroffensive that began in Kharkiv Oblast has not yet culminated and is actively pushing into Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin took measures to assert full Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Russian forces conducted the first strike on Kyiv Oblast since June with a Shahed-136 drone.
- The Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, announced that Putin awarded him the rank of Colonel-General.
- Increasing domestic critiques of Russia’s “partial mobilization” are likely driving Putin to scapegoat the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and specifically Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.
- Ukrainian troops likely consolidated positions and regrouped in northern Kherson Oblast after making major gains over in the last 48 hours.
- Russian sources reported Ukrainian offensive preparations northwest, west, and northeast of Kherson City.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on October 5.
- Russian milbloggers continued to criticize the implementation of the Russian “partial mobilization” on October 5.
- Russian citizens who are economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority Russian communities continue to bear a disproportionate burden in mobilization rates and casualty rates according to investigative reports, suggesting that Russian authorities may be deliberately placing poor and minority Russian citizens in more dangerous positions than well-off or ethnic Russians.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin completed the final formality in the process for illegally annexing Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories on October 5.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 4, 10:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces continued to make significant gains in Kherson Oblast while simultaneously continuing advances in Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts on October 4. Ukrainian forces liberated several settlements on the eastern bank of the Inhulets River along the T2207 highway, forcing Russian forces to retreat to the south toward Kherson City. Ukrainian forces also continued to push south along the Dnipro River and the T0403 highway, severing two Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in northern Kherson Oblast and forcing Russians south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border toward the Berislav area. Ukrainian military officials noted that the Ukrainian interdiction campaign is crippling Russian attempts to transfer additional ammunition, reserves, mobilized men, and means of defense to frontline positions.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian forces also continued to advance east of the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast, and Russian sources claimed that battles are ongoing near the R66 Svatove-Kremenna highway.<sup>[2]</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s announcement of partial mobilization is having more significant short-term impacts on the Russian domestic context than on the war in Ukraine, interacting with Russian battlefield failures to exacerbate fractures in the information space

**that confuse and undermine Putin's narratives.** Ukrainian sources have rightly observed that the partial mobilization is not a major threat in the short term because the Ukrainian counteroffensive is moving faster than the mobilization can generate effects.[3] Ukrainian Intelligence Chief Kyrylo Budanov even stated that mobilization in Russia is a "gift" to Ukraine because the Kremlin is finding itself in a "dead end," caught between its failures and its determination to hold what it has seized. [4] The controversies surrounding the poorly executed partial mobilization, coupled with significant Russian defeats in Kharkiv Oblast and around Lyman, have intensified infighting between pro-Putin Russian nationalist factions and are creating new fractures among voices who speak to Putin's core constituencies.[5]

**Putin is visibly failing at balancing the competing demands of the Russian nationalists who have become increasingly combative since mobilization began despite sharing Putin's general war aims and goals in Ukraine.** ISW has identified three main factions in the current Russian nationalist information space: Russian milbloggers and war correspondents, former Russian or proxy officers and veterans, and some of the Russian *siloviki*—people with meaningful power bases and forces of their own. Putin needs to retain the support of all three of these factions. Milbloggers present Putin's vision to a pro-war audience in both Russia and the proxy republics. The veteran community is helping organize and support force generation campaigns.[6] The *siloviki* are providing combat power on the battlefield. Putin needs all three factions to sustain his war effort, but the failures in Ukraine combined with the chaotic partial mobilization are seemingly disrupting the radical nationalist community in Russia. Putin is currently trying to appease this community by featuring some milbloggers on state-owned television, allowing *siloviki* to generate their own forces and continue offensive operations around Bakhmut and Donetsk City, and placating veterans by ordering mobilization and engaging the general public in the war effort as they have long demanded.

Russian failures around Lyman galvanized strong and direct criticism of the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Alexander Lapin, who supposedly commanded the Lyman grouping, as ISW has previously reported.[7] This criticism originated from the *siloviki* group, spearheaded by Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Kadyrov and Prigozhin represent an emerging voice within the regime's fighting forces that is attacking the more traditional and conventional approach to the war pursued by Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu and the uniformed military command. The chaotic execution of Putin's mobilization order followed by the collapse of the Lyman pocket ignited tensions between the more vocal and radical Kadyrov-Prigozhin camp, who attacked the MoD and the uniformed military for their poor handling of the war.[8] Putin now finds himself in a dilemma. He cannot risk alienating the Kadyrov-Prigozhin camp, as he desperately needs Kadyrov's Chechen forces and Prigozhin's Wagner Group mercenaries to fight in Ukraine.[9] Nor can he disenfranchise the MoD establishment, which provides the overwhelming majority of Russian military power in Ukraine and the institutional underpinnings needed to carry out the mobilization order and continue the war.

**The Kadyrov-Prigozhin incident sparked a rift between the *siloviki* and the milbloggers, with the milbloggers defending Lapin.** Milbloggers are criticizing Kadyrov's attack on Lapin, claiming that it stems from competition between Lapin and Kadyrov-Prigozhin.[10] The Kremlin did not punish Kadyrov or Prigozhin for their direct attacks on Lapin and the Defense Ministry but has instead deflected blame for the Russian defeat in Kharkiv Oblast onto the Western Military District (WMD). Kremlin-affiliated outlets have even interviewed milbloggers who have painted Lapin as a hero for saving the stranded WMD units in Lyman, likely in an effort to divert responsibility for the Russian defeat there onto recently fired WMD Commander Colonel-General Alexander Zhuravlev. [11] Milbloggers, who had frequently complimented Kadyrov or Prigozhin before this incident, are now more skeptical of the *siloviki* community, attacking it for being too self-interested.

**Fractures are emerging within the Russian milblogger community itself, moreover.** Milbloggers have begun increasingly questioning each other's military credentials and rights to offer recommendations for the Russian Armed Forces.[12] One milblogger complained that commentators without appropriate military experience have been improperly criticizing current military commanders and should be focusing on simply portraying the situation on the frontlines without editorializing. [13] These critiques have been largely aimed at the milblogger discourse following the Russian defeat in Lyman and the Kadyrov-Prigozhin incident.[14] These attacks on some milbloggers' credentials have drawn responses from milbloggers who have met with Putin himself and are being featured on Kremlin-controlled television channels, who now declare that they are the ones who have shown the true shortcomings of the Russian forces to Putin so that he can address them.[15]

**The veterans' community is dissatisfied with the execution of Putin's mobilization.** ISW reported in May that an independent Russian veterans' organization, the All-Russian Officers Assembly, published an open letter calling on Putin to declare war on Ukraine, announce partial mobilization, and form new war-time administrations to execute the mobilization order.[16] Those new administrations

would likely have improved or supplanted the military commissariats that have been mishandling the current partial mobilization. The Assembly also encouraged Putin to recognize that Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine, not Ukrainians, long before this narrative gained prominence in the Kremlin's justifications for its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman. This elder nationalist military community has long been warning Putin of the limitations of his forces, problems in the Russian military-industrial complex, and the failings of the Russian mobilization system. Putin has refused to order general mobilization or declare war against Ukraine, and the partial mobilization has likely been executed as poorly as those who had recommended fixing the mobilization system had feared. Former Deputy Commander of the Russian Southern Military District Andrey Gurulev stated that the Russian military command must disclose its inability to mobilize 300,000 combat-ready reservists and broaden the mobilization criteria if Russia is to have any hope of regaining the initiative in this war.<sup>[17]</sup> Gurulev even expressed his support for Kadyrov's and Prigozhin's attack on Luhansk, highlighting the growing fractiousness of the nationalist information space.

**The fragmentation of the Russian nationalist information space could have significant domestic impacts and could even affect the stability of Putin's regime.** Putin will be unable to meet the mutually exclusive demands of various groups. Kadyrov and Prigozhin are pushing for a change in the way Russia fights the war to one more suited to their unconventional modes of mobilizing personnel and fighting. The veterans have been pushing for a more traditional overhaul of the Russian higher military command and MoD and for putting Russia on a conventional war footing and the Russian MoD. Russian milblogger are currently defending the Kremlin's selection of uniformed commanders while continuing to attack the MoD and making a variety of extreme demands and recommendations of their own—all the while reporting on Russia's frontline failings in detail even as the MoD tries to silence them. Putin cannot afford to lose the support of any of these groups, nor can satisfy them all as the war wears on and Russian troops continue to sustain losses. The shocks of the Kharkiv and Lyman defeats, energized by the partial mobilization and its poor management, have exposed these deepening fissures within Putin's core constituencies to the view of all Russians. They could even begin to seed the notion that Putin is not fully in control of his own base. The ramifications of such a development for his regime are hard to predict.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued to make significant gains in Kherson Oblast while simultaneously continuing advances in Kharkiv and Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of partial mobilization is having more significant short-term impacts on the Russian domestic context than on the war in Ukraine, catalyzing fractures in the information space that confuse and undermine Putin's narratives.
- Ukrainian forces continued to make substantial gains in northern Kherson Oblast on October 4, beginning to collapse the sparsely-manned Russian lines in that area.
- Ukrainian forces continued to make gains in eastern Kharkiv Oblast west of Svatove on October 4, pushing past the Oskil River and increasingly threatening Russian positions in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct artillery, air, and missile strikes west of Hulyapole and in Dnipropetrovsk and Mykolaiv Oblasts on October 4.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on October 4.
- The Kremlin effectively ordered local Russian administrations and non-Ministry of Defense institutions to fund a significant part of the mobilization effort from local budgets.
- Russian security officials are attempting to maintain their domestic security apparatus as Putin's partial mobilization drains the Russian security sector to generate additional forces to fight in Ukraine.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 3

[Click here to read the full report](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Katherine Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 3, 9 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces continued to make substantial gains around Lyman and in Kherson Oblast in the last 48 hours.** Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian troops made significant breakthroughs in northern Kherson Oblast between October 2 and 3.<sup>[1]</sup> Geolocated footage corroborates Russian claims that Ukrainian troops are continuing to push east of Lyman and may have broken through the Luhansk Oblast border in the direction of Kreminna.<sup>[2]</sup> As ISW has previously reported, the Russian groupings in northern Kherson Oblast and on the Lyman front were largely comprised of units that had been regarded as among Russia's premier conventional fighting forces before the war.<sup>[3]</sup> Elements of the 144th Motorized Rifle Division of the 20th Combined Arms Army reportedly withdrew from Lyman to rear positions near Kreminna before October 2.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian sources previously reported that elements of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), especially the 76th Guards Air Assault Division, are active in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[5]</sup> Both the 144th Motorized Rifle Division and the 76th Guards Air Assault Division were previously lauded as some of Russia's most elite forces, and their apparent failures to hold territory against major Ukrainian counter-offensive actions is consistent with ISW's previous assessment that even the most elite Russian military forces are becoming increasingly degraded as the war continues. This phenomenon was also visible in the collapse of the 4th Tank Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army earlier in the Kharkiv counter-offensive.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin may be continuing efforts to redirect blame for recent Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast.** Russian outlet PБK (RBK), citing sources within the Russian regime, reported on October 3 that Lieutenant-General Roman Berdnikov has replaced Colonel-General Alexander Zhuravlev as commander of the Western Military District (WMD).<sup>[7]</sup> As ISW previously assessed, WMD units have been largely operating in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast over the last few months but without a clear commander. Zhuravlev has not been seen for some time, and Putin cycled through two commanders of the "western grouping of forces" in two weeks. Putin may be attempting to redirect the growing anger for Russian losses in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman by assigning a new face prominently to the WMD.<sup>[8]</sup> This announcement may also be an effort to shield Colonel General Alexander Lapin, commander of the Central Military District (CMD), from widespread criticism for recent Russian failures around Lyman.<sup>[9]</sup> Putin may seek to shift the blame for future Russian losses in Kharkiv and possibly Luhansk Oblasts to Berdnikov. Criticism of Lapin in recent days has served as a catalyst for wider breakdown within the Russian nationalist information space, and Berdnikov's appointment may be intended to distract and redirect that growing dissatisfaction.

**Russian officials released Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) director Ihor Murashov from detention and are likely continuing to undermine Ukrainian control of the plant.** Energoatom reported that the Russian military detained Director General of the ZNPP Ihor Murashov on September 30 and released him into Ukrainian-controlled territory on October 3 following talks with International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Raphael Grossi.<sup>[10]</sup> Russian officials will likely not allow Murashov to return to his position at the ZNPP. Russian officials will likely attempt to use their physical removal of Murashov to assert further control over the nuclear power plant.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces have made substantial gains around Lyman and in northern Kherson Oblast over the last 24 hours. The Russian units defeated on these fronts were previously considered to be among Russia's premier conventional fighting forces.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin may use the appointment of Lieutenant-General Roman Berdnikov to the command of the Western Military District to redirect blame for recent or future Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian officials released the director of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, whom they had illegally detained, and are likely continuing to undermine Ukrainian control of the plant.
- Ukrainian forces made advances on the Oskil River-Kreminna line towards the Luhansk oblast border.
- Ukrainian forces advanced in northern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is introducing punitive measures to target the Russian bureaucratic institutions responsible for the execution of partial mobilization.
- Russian officials acknowledged that the Kremlin intends to invade, occupy, and illegally annex additional Ukrainian territory in the south and east and may alter the claimed borders of its occupied territories.
- The Russian State Duma approved the Kremlin's illegal accession treaties on October 3 and laid out the administrative timeline for integrating illegally annexed Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 3, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

**Special Edition on Russian Information Space Following the Defeat in Lyman**

Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

October 2, 10:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

This campaign assessment special edition focuses on dramatic changes in the Russian information space following the Russian defeat around Lyman and in Kharkiv Oblast and amid the failures of Russia's partial mobilization. Ukrainian forces made continued gains around Lyman, Donetsk Oblast, and have broken through Russian defensive positions in northeastern Kherson Oblast. Those developments are summarized briefly and will be covered in more detail tomorrow when more confirmation is available.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 2, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 1

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 1, 7 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces inflicted another significant operational defeat on Russia and liberated Lyman, Donetsk Oblast, on October 1. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the withdrawal of Russian troops from Lyman to "more advantageous positions" to avoid the "threat of encirclement" in the settlement.<sup>[1]</sup> Social media footage and Ukrainian military officials confirmed that Ukrainian forces have entered Lyman and are likely clearing the settlement as of October 1.

The Russian information space – composed of Kremlin propagandists, pundits, and milbloggers – registered the defeat as the result of the Russian military command's failure to send reinforcements in a timely manner, while openly criticizing repeated bureaucratic failures during the mobilization.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian commentators overwhelmingly expressed their hopes that partial mobilization would generate enough force to resume offensive operations and regain the initiative. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, apparently devastated by the defeat in Lyman, called on Russia to continue to fight to "liberate" the four annexed territories with all available means including low-yield nuclear weapons.<sup>[3]</sup>

Kadyrov's rant is similar to the disorganized and often hyperbolic milblogger rants that call for the Kremlin to continue the war in Ukraine, and his call for the use of nuclear weapons was not representative of the discourse within the Russian information space. Russian federal TV channels

and ultra-hawkish milbloggers have often discussed Russian nuclear capabilities as part of their efforts to stoke patriotic sentiments among Russian domestic audiences, and Kadyrov's statement was not especially noteworthy in this context.

Kadyrov's call for using tactical nuclear weapons is likely inconsistent with his demands to continue the "special military operation" to bring more Ukrainian territory under Russian control. The Russian military in its current state is almost certainly unable to operate on a nuclear battlefield even though it has the necessary equipment and has historically trained its units to do so. The chaotic agglomeration of exhausted contract soldiers, hastily mobilized reservists, conscripts, and mercenaries that currently comprise the Russian ground forces could not function in a nuclear environment. Any areas affected by Russian tactical nuclear weapons would thus be impassable for the Russians, likely precluding Russian advances. This consideration is another factor that reduces the likelihood of Russian tactical nuclear weapons use.

**Kadyrov blamed the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Alexander Lapin, for failures around Lyman. Kadyrov's attacks gained significant traction within the Russian information space and indicate that the rift between Russian traditional and non-traditional forces is likely growing.** Kadyrov stated that Lapin, responsible for the "central" group of forces in Ukraine, failed to properly equip units operating in the Lyman area and moved his headquarters far from the frontlines. Kadyrov also accused the Russian General Staff and specifically Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, of covering up Lapin's failures. Wagner Group financier Evgeniy Prigozhin publicly agreed with Kadyrov's criticism of Lapin, saying that the higher military command should fight "barefoot with machine guns on the frontlines."<sup>[4]</sup> Milbloggers and state television hosts praised Kadyrov's and Prigozhin's critiques of the Russian military command, adding that the command is corrupt and disinterested in Russian strategic goals.<sup>[5]</sup> Kadyrov, Lapin, and Prigozhin are all operating in the Donbas sector, and such comments indicate the strains within the Russian forces operating in Ukraine and their leadership. The Kremlin may be amplifying such criticism to set informational conditions for personnel changes within the higher military command in weeks to come.

**The defeat around Lyman also indicates that Russian President Vladimir Putin – who has reportedly been micromanaging Russian commanders on the ground – is deprioritizing defending Luhansk Oblast in favor of holding occupied territories in southern Ukraine.** Ukrainian and Russian sources consistently indicate that Russian forces continued to reinforce Russian positions in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, despite the recent collapse of the Kharkiv-Izyum front and even as the Russian positions around Lyman collapsed.<sup>[6]</sup> The decision not to reinforce vulnerable Kupyansk or Lyman front lines was almost certainly Putin's, not that of the military command, and suggests that Putin cares far more about holding the strategic terrain of Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts than he does about Luhansk Oblast.

**Russia is likely setting conditions to assume legal responsibility for the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).** Russian authorities detained the general director of the ZNPP, Ihor Murashov, on September 30.<sup>[7]</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that Murashov's detention will have no tangible impact on the operation of the plant since the power units are already shut down and stated that authorities are currently undertaking "routine" legal work to transfer control of the plant to Russian state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom and create a new legal entity for the ZNPP.<sup>[8]</sup> Murashov's detention and the "legal" process of transferring control of the ZNPP to Rosatom are noteworthy indications that Russian authorities will likely seek to exploit their control of the ZNPP to pressure the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to legitimize the illegal Russian annexations of occupied Ukrainian territory by coercing it to acknowledge Russia's legal control over the ZNPP.

**Russian forces conducted a failed ground attack on Kozacha Lopan in northern Kharkiv Oblast on October 1.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian ground attack on Kozacha Lopan, 5km from the Kharkiv Oblast-Russia border.<sup>[9]</sup> Such attacks indicate that Russian President Vladimir Putin likely retains the aim of regaining control of territory beyond the oblasts he has illegally annexed and is willing to allocate Russian military assets to such offensive actions rather than dedicating them to defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Donbas.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces liberated Lyman and are likely clearing the settlement as of October 1.
- Russia is likely setting conditions to assume legal responsibility for the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Ukrainian troops are continuing to conduct counteroffensive operations in Kherson Oblast and setting conditions for future advances.

- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas of Donetsk Oblast.
  - Russian forces continued routine strikes against Ukrainian rear areas in the south.
  - Russian military leadership is continuing to compromise the future reconstitution of the force by prioritizing the immediate mobilization of as many bodies as possible for ongoing fighting in Ukraine.
  - Russian mobilization authorities continue to carry out discriminatory mobilization practices.
- 

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 30, 8:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not threaten an immediate nuclear attack to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensives into Russian-occupied Ukraine during his speech announcing **Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory**. ISW analysts broke down Putin's speech in a separate September 30 Special Report: "[Assessing Putin's Implicit Nuclear Threats after Annexation](#)."

**Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the illegal Russian annexation of four Ukrainian territories on September 30 without clearly defining the borders of those claimed territories.** Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov declined to specify the borders of the newly annexed territories in a September 30 conversation with reporters: "[the] Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics [DNR and LNR] were recognized by Russia within the borders of 2014. As for the territories of Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, I need to clarify this. We will clarify everything today."<sup>[1]</sup> DNR head Denis Pushilin added that even the federal district into which the annexed territories will be incorporated remains unclear: "What will it be called, what are the borders—let's wait for the final decisions, consultations are now being held on how to do it right."<sup>[2]</sup> Russian officials may clarify those boundaries and administrative allocations in the coming days but face an inherent problem: Ukrainian forces still control large swathes of Donetsk and Zaporizhia and some areas of Luhansk and Kherson oblasts, a military reality that is unlikely to change in the coming months.

Putin likely rushed the annexation of these territories before making even basic administrative decisions on boundaries and governance. Russian officials have therefore not set clear policies or conditions for proper administration. Organizing governance for these four forcibly annexed oblasts would be bureaucratically challenging for any state after Russian forces systematically killed, arrested, or drove out the Ukrainian officials who previously ran the regional administrations. But the bureaucratic incompetence demonstrated by the Kremlin's attempted partial mobilization of Russian men suggests that Russian bureaucrats will similarly struggle to establish governance structures over a resistant and unwilling population in the warzone that is Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory.

**Putin announced that Russia's usual autumn conscription cycle will start a month late on November 1, likely because Russia's partial mobilization of Russian men is taxing the bureaucracy of the Russian military commissariats that would usually oversee the semi-annual conscription cycle.**<sup>[3]</sup> Putin's September 30 decree calls for 120,000 Russian conscripts—7,000 fewer than in autumn 2021. Neither Putin's decree nor subsequent official statements clarified whether Ukrainian civilians of conscription age (18-27) in Russia's newly-annexed occupied Ukrainian territories will be liable for conscription. A representative of Russia's Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate, Rear Admiral Vladimir Tsimlyansky, claimed that no autumn 2022 conscripts would fight in the "special operation" in Ukraine, a promise Putin also made (and broke) about the autumn 2021 and spring 2022 conscripts.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian conscripts are not legally deployable overseas until they have received at least four months of training unless Putin were to declare martial law.<sup>[5]</sup> Russia's illegal annexation of occupied areas in Ukraine likely removes this problem within the framework of Russian Federation law, which may be part of the reason for Putin's rush in announcing the annexation.

**Russian officials could re-mobilize last year's conscripts when their terms expire on October 1.** Tsimlyansky emphasized on September 30 that all Russian conscripts whose terms have expired—

meaning those conscripted in autumn 2021—will be released from service and returned to their residences “in a timely manner.”<sup>[6]</sup> Once released, autumn 2021 conscripts will technically become part of the Russian reserves, making them legally mobilizable under Putin’s September 21 partial mobilization order.

**Putin invited some Russian milbloggers and war correspondents who have previously criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for a lack of transparency about Russian progress in Ukraine to attend his annexation speech in Moscow.**<sup>[7]</sup> Russian state media has been increasingly featuring some milbloggers on federal television channels as well, which likely indicates that Putin is attempting to secure the support of these nationalist and pro-war figures rather than censor them. The milblogger presence in Moscow may also explain why several prominent Telegram channels had limited or no coverage of daily frontline news on September 29.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the illegal Russian annexation of four Ukrainian territories on September 30 without clearly defining the borders of those claimed territories.
- Putin announced that Russia’s usual autumn conscription cycle will start a month late on November 1, likely because Russia’s partial mobilization of Russian men is taxing the bureaucracy of the Russian military commissariats that would usually oversee the semi-annual conscription cycle.
- Russian officials could re-mobilize last year’s conscripts when their terms expire on October 1.
- Ukrainian forces will likely capture or encircle Lyman within the next 72 hours.
- Ukrainian military officials maintained operational silence regarding Ukrainian ground maneuvers in Kherson Oblast but stated that Ukrainian forces continued to force Russian troops into defending their positions.
- Russian troops continued ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian authorities continued efforts to coerce Russian participation in mobilization efforts, but will likely struggle to coerce participation as Russians continue to flee Russia for border states who welcome them.
- Russian officials are accepting bribes and engaging in other preferential treatment to prevent or ease the economic burden of mobilization on the wealthy.
- Russian authorities are continuing to deploy mobilized personnel to Ukraine without adequate training or equipment, and personnel are unlikely to be able to afford to provide their own supplies.
- Russian forces conducted a missile strike on a Ukrainian humanitarian convoy and attempted to blame the Ukrainian government.

#### Assessing Putin’s Implicit Nuclear Threats After Annexation

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Katherine Lawlor, and Kateryna Stepanenko

September 30, 12:45pm ET

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not threaten an immediate nuclear attack to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensives into Russian-occupied Ukraine during his speech announcing Russia’s illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. Putin announced Russia’s illegal annexation of Ukraine’s Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts on September 30 even as Ukrainian forces encircled Russian troops in the key city of Lyman, Luhansk Oblast, immediately demonstrating that Russia will struggle to hold the territory it claims to have annexed. Putin likely intends annexation to freeze the war along the current frontlines and allow time for Russian mobilization to reconstitute Russian forces. The annexation of parts of four Ukrainian oblasts does not signify that Putin has abandoned his stated objective of destroying the Ukrainian state for a lesser goal. As ISW assessed in May, if Putin’s annexation of occupied Ukraine stabilizes the conflict along new front lines, “the Kremlin could reconstitute its forces and renew its invasion of Ukraine in the coming years, this time from a position of greater strength and territorial advantage.”<sup>[1]</sup>

[Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 29](#)

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 29, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Kremlin continues to violate its stated “partial mobilization” procedures and contradict its own messaging even while recognizing the systematic failures within the Russian bureaucracy just eight days after the declaration of mobilization.** Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged and deflected the blame for repeated “mistakes” during the first week of mobilization in his opening remarks at the Russian Security Council meeting on September 29.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin recounted instances of mobilizing men without prior military experience, assigning servicemen to the wrong specializations, and unfairly mobilizing men with health conditions or large families. ISW has previously reported that Kremlin-state media began exploring similar complaints just days after Putin’s declaration of “partial mobilization.”<sup>[2]</sup> Putin called on the Russian General Staff, Ministry of Defense (MoD), and federal subjects to fix the reported problems with mobilization, while noting that prosecutors and working groups within enlistment centers will monitor all complaints. Speaker of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin also announced that Russian men with a military registration cannot leave their permanent residence without the approval of enlistment centers.<sup>[3]</sup> Volodin and the Kremlin’s Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov later retracted these statements, noting that the Russian MoD informed him that Russian officials may only restrict the movement of military-registered men in case of full mobilization.<sup>[4]</sup> Republic of Dagestan Head Sergey Melikov also condemned a police car with a loudspeaker that ordered all men to appear at the enlistment center while driving around Derbente, Republic of Dagestan, stating that local authorities did not authorize such announcements.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The Kremlin’s contradictory statements and procedures demonstrate the fundamental nature of the systemic weakness of the Russian military establishment that have characterized the entire invasion.** Russian officials continue to execute a supposed reservist call-up as a confused undertaking somewhere between a conscription drive and the declaration of general mobilization, likely issuing conflicting orders to already flawed bureaucratic institutions. CIA Director Williams Burns noted that even if the Kremlin manages to mobilize 300,000 men it will not be able to ensure logistic support or provide sufficient training and equipment to the newly-mobilized men.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukrainian military officials noted that Russian forces have already committed mobilized men to Kharkiv Oblast who have since told the Ukrainian forces that they did not receive any training prior to their deployment around September 15.<sup>[7]</sup>

**The bureaucratic failures in the Russian partial mobilization may indicate that Putin has again bypassed the Russian higher military command or the Russian MoD.** The deployment of mobilized men to centers of hostilities on the Kharkiv or Kherson frontlines may suggest that Putin is directly working with axis commanders on the ground who are likely clamoring for reinforcements, rather than following standard military practices (that are also required by Russian law) such as providing training to the mobilized prior to their deployment to the frontlines. ISW has previously reported that Putin bypassed the Russian chain of command on numerous occasions when making decisions regarding the progress of the Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine, likely because he had lost confidence in the Russian MoD.<sup>[8]</sup> The contradictory and inconsistent narratives used by Kremlin officials and the Russian MoD about mobilization procedures could indicate that Putin, as the supreme commander, issued divergent or contradictory orders.

**Belarus remains highly unlikely to become directly involved in the war in Ukraine on the part of Russia, despite statements made by Ukrainian sources on September 29 that Belarus is preparing to accommodate newly mobilized Russian servicemen.** The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Belarus is preparing to accommodate up to 20,000 mobilized Russian men in existing civilian premises, warehouses, and abandoned agricultural facilities in Belarus.<sup>[9]</sup> Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Oleksiy Hromov, similarly stated that actions are being taken to expand the Luninets Airfield (50km from the Belarusian-Ukrainian border) and to repair storage and military infrastructure.<sup>[10]</sup> Independent monitoring organization Belarusian Hajan Project also reported that Russia delivered Su-30 aircraft to the Baranavichy airfield in Belarus.<sup>[11]</sup> These data points may indicate that Russia hopes to use Belarusian military facilities and infrastructure to hold and potentially train newly mobilized Russian forces, but it remains exceedingly unlikely that these are leading indicators of imminent Belarusian involvement in Ukraine on Russia’s behalf. Hromov also stated that there are no signs of Russian troops forming a strike group to target northern Ukraine, which suggests that Russian forces are unlikely to use Belarus as a launching pad for ground attacks into Ukraine despite reports of

troop and equipment accumulations in Belarus.[12] These reports more likely suggest that Russian President Vladimir Putin is continuing to leverage his relationship with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in order to use Belarusian land for the development of Russian military capabilities. ISW has previously assessed that Lukashenko cannot afford the domestic ramifications of Belarusian involvement in Ukraine.[13] ISW also assesses that Russia does not have the ability to form a ground strike force from scratch or from existing units in Belarus quickly.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin continues to violate its stated “partial mobilization” procedures and contradict its own messaging even while recognizing the systematic failures within the Russian bureaucracy just eight days after the declaration of mobilization.
- Belarus may be preparing to accommodate newly-mobilized Russian servicemen but remains unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine on Russia’s behalf.
- Ukrainian troops have likely nearly completed the encirclement of the Russian grouping in Lyman and cut critical ground lines of communication (GLOCS) that support Russian troops in the Drobysheve-Lyman area.
- Ukrainian military officials maintained operational silence regarding Ukrainian ground maneuvers in Kherson Oblast but stated that Russian forces are deploying newly-mobilized troops to reinforce the Kherson Oblast frontline.
- Ukrainian troops continued to target Russian logistics, transportation, and military assets in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian troops continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces have likely increased the use of Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones in southern Ukraine.
- An independent Russian polling organization, the Levada Center, found that almost half of polled Russians are anxious about mobilization, but that support for Russian military actions declined only slightly to 44%.
- Ukrainian officials reiterated their concerns that the Kremlin will mobilize Ukrainian citizens in occupied oblasts following Russian President Vladimir Putin’s annexation announcement.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 28, 7:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian milbloggers discussed Ukrainian gains around Lyman with increased concern on September 28, suggesting that Russian forces in this area may face imminent defeat.[1] Several Russian milbloggers and prominent military correspondents claimed that Ukrainian troops advanced west, north, and northeast of Lyman and are working to complete the envelopment of Russian troops in Lyman and along the northern bank of the Siverskyi Donets River in this area.[2] Russian milbloggers stated that Ukrainian troops are threatening Russian positions and lines of communication that support the Lyman grouping. The collapse of the Lyman pocket will likely be highly consequential to the Russian grouping in northern Donetsk and western Luhansk oblasts and may allow Ukrainian troops to threaten Russian positions along the western Luhansk Oblast border and in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area.

**Russian military leadership has failed to set information conditions for potentially imminent Russian defeat in Lyman.** The Russian Ministry of Defense has not addressed current Russian losses around Lyman or prepared for the collapse of this sector of the frontline, which will likely further reduce already-low Russian morale. Russian military authorities previously failed to set sufficient information conditions for Russian losses following the first stages of the Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv Oblast, devastating morale and leading to panic among Russian forces across the Eastern axis. The subsequent ire of the Russian nationalist information space likely played a role in driving the Kremlin to order partial mobilization in the days following Ukraine’s initial sweeping counteroffensive in a haphazard attempt to reinforce Russian lines. Future Ukrainian gains around critical areas in

Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast may drive additional wedges between Russian nationalists and military leadership, and between Russian forces and their superiors.

**The Kremlin could temporarily postpone announcing the annexation of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory to better prepare the Russian information space and administrative organization, although September 30 remains the most likely date for some kind of annexation announcement.** ISW forecasted on September 27 that Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely announce the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory on September 30 in his planned address to both houses of the Russian parliament.<sup>[3]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on September 28 that Russia will “fulfill the aspirations of the residents of the LNR, DNR, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts to be together with Russia” in the “near future.”<sup>[4]</sup> However, Russian State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin announced on September 28 that the State Duma should hold its accession sessions to approve the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory on October 3 and 4.<sup>[5]</sup> Latvian-based Russian-language opposition outlet *Meduza* quoted Kremlin sources on September 28 who claimed that the Kremlin decided “not to rush things.” Those sources told *Meduza* that “the PR effect from [annexation] will be almost zero” due to broad dissatisfaction with partial mobilization in Russia.<sup>[6]</sup> *Meduza* reported that the Kremlin conducted a dissatisfactory closed public opinion poll that demonstrated broad Russian discontent and may be attempting to rectify public unhappiness with mobilization before announcing annexation.

Russian-appointed occupation administration leaders of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk Oblasts each shared an appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin by September 28, asking Putin to recognize their sham referenda and welcome them to Russia.<sup>[7]</sup> The Russian occupation leaders of each oblast will likely meet with Putin in the coming days to present their requests. Putin could announce those performative accession negotiations, rather than final annexation, in his September 30 speech.

**Russian authorities continue to send newly-mobilized and undertrained recruits to directly reinforce severely degraded remnants of various units, including units that were previously considered to be Russia’s premier conventional fighting forces.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that newly-mobilized Russian men arrived to reinforce elements of the 1st Tank Regiment of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army in unspecified areas of Ukraine with no training at all.<sup>[8]</sup> Social media footage from September 27 shows a Russian soldier mobilized into the 1st Tank Regiment explaining that he will be sent to fight in Kherson Oblast within two days without any basic training, as ISW reported yesterday.<sup>[9]</sup> The 1st Guards Tank Army was considered Russia’s premier mechanized force prior to February 24, and that fact that its elements are being reinforced with poorly disciplined, untrained men is consistent with ISW’s previous assessments that even Russia’s most elite units have sustained substantial losses in Ukraine and are therefore increasingly degraded.<sup>[10]</sup> The addition of newly mobilized forces to elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army is unlikely to lend these units any decisive combat power.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian military leadership has likely failed to set information conditions for the potential defeat of the Russian grouping in Lyman, despite increasingly concerned discourse among Russian milbloggers regarding the potential for a Ukrainian envelopment of Lyman.
- The Kremlin could temporarily postpone announcing the annexation of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory to better prepare the Russian information space and administrative organization, although September 30 remains the most likely date for some kind of annexation announcement.
- Russian authorities continue to send newly-mobilized and undertrained recruits to directly reinforce severely degraded remnants of various units, including units that were previously considered to be Russia’s premier conventional fighting forces.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued to make significant gains around Lyman on September 28, advancing from the north along the Zelena Dolyna-Kolodiazi arc and from the southeast around Yampil.
- Ukrainian military officials largely maintained operational silence regarding specific Ukrainian actions in Kherson Oblast on September 28 but stated that Ukrainian troops are continuing positional battles in unspecified locations to consolidate and improve their positions along the Southern Axis.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian military recruitment officials are openly contradicting the Kremlin’s publicly-stated guidelines for mobilization to meet quota requirements even as Kremlin propaganda is attempting to change the public perception of partial mobilization.

- Russian authorities are beginning to restrict movement of Russian citizens into Russian border regions to cope with hundreds of thousands of Russian men attempting to flee the country.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, and Mason Clark

September 27, 8:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian authorities in occupied parts of Ukraine's Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts completed their falsified annexation "referenda" on September 27 and implausibly claimed that each sham referendum received between 87 and 99% approval from Ukrainian residents.[1]** Russian officials pre-ordained and falsified the approval ratings and alleged voter participation rates for the sham referenda while coercing Ukrainian civilians in occupied territories to performatively vote for Russian annexation, as ISW has previously reported.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely announce the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory on September 30.** The completion of the performative referenda marks the last prerequisite for Russian President Vladimir Putin to declare the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory. The UK Ministry of Defense reported that Putin will likely make the declaration before or during an address to both houses of Russia's parliament on Friday, September 30.[2] Putin followed a similar approach when he illegally annexed Ukrainian Crimea in 2014: a sham referendum, followed by a presidential decree of recognition and a treaty of accession that the Russian Federal Assembly formally approved within five days of the sham Crimean referendum. The Russian proxy leader of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), Denis Pushilin, told Russian media on September 27 that he previously asked Putin to approve the results of the referendum before it was held and would travel to Moscow to sign an agreement.[3] The head of Russia's proxy Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), Leonid Pasechnik, announced on September 27 that the LNR will join Russia "very soon" and that he will travel to Moscow on September 27 or 28 to ask Putin in person to approve the results of the sham referenda.[4] ISW previously forecasted that Putin will annex occupied Ukrainian territory by or soon after October 1 to enable the forced conscription of Ukrainian civilians into the Russian military in the normal autumn conscription cycle.[5]

**Russian forces are reportedly committing newly-mobilized Western Military District (WMD) men to the Kherson and Kharkiv Oblast frontlines without prior training.** A mobilized servicemember of the 1st Tank Regiment of an unspecified unit recorded a video plea stating that his unit will not receive training prior to deploying to Kherson Oblast on September 29.[6] RFE/RL's Mark Krutov geolocated the serviceman's surroundings to the 2nd Guards Motor Rifle Division's base in Kalininets, Moscow Oblast. ISW previously reported that Russian forces have committed elements of the 147th Artillery Regiment of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division to Kherson Oblast in late August, and are likely attempting to reinforce units in the south (that have operated in Kyiv and Kharkiv Oblasts) in short periods with untrained, newly-mobilized men.[7] Elements of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division previously based out of Izyum asked to leave their positions on August 30 due to moral exhaustion.[8] Russian opposition outlet *Mediaazona* also reported that mobilized men of the 237th Tank Regiment of the WMD's 3rd Motor Rifle Division based out of Valuyki are deploying to Donbas frontlines after only one day of training.[9] ISW cannot independently verify *Mediaazona*'s report, but the 237th Regiment also operated around Izyum since late March.[10] Mobilized men with a day or two of training are unlikely to meaningfully reinforce Russian positions affected by Ukrainian counteroffensives in the south and east.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely announce the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory on September 30 after Russian officials completed their falsified "referenda" on September 27.
- Russian forces are reportedly committing newly-mobilized Western Military District (WMD) men to the Kherson and Kharkiv Oblast frontlines without prior training.
- Ukrainian forces are consolidating their positions on the eastern bank of the Oskil river and made further gains on the outskirts of Lyman.

- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) as part of the southern counter-offensive interdiction campaign, particularly disrupting Russian efforts to build barge crossings.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations around Bakhmut and west of Donetsk City, increasingly leveraging penal units.
- Russian forces inflicted severe damage on a Ukrainian airfield in Kryvyi Rih and continued routine air and missile strikes across southern Ukraine.
- Russian authorities are establishing checkpoints at Russia's borders to forcibly mobilize Russian men who are seeking to avoid forced mobilization by fleeing the country.
- Russian officials are setting conditions to forcibly mobilize or conscript Ukrainian civilians in soon-to-be annexed areas of occupied Ukraine.
- The Russian annexation of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk will likely exacerbate tensions within DNR and LNR forces, who regularly mutiny when asked to fight outside the borders of their own oblasts.
- Russian officials may attempt to reframe their invasion of Ukraine and occupation of soon-to-be-annexed Ukrainian territory as a “counterterrorism operation.”

*We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we™ do not describe them in these reports.*

- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Southern and Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and two supporting efforts);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 26, 11:25 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin is attempting to message its way out of the reality of major problems in the execution of its “partial mobilization,” but its narratives are unlikely to placate Russians who can perceive the real mistakes all around them. The Kremlin is deflecting blame for the Russian government’s failure to abide by its own stated criteria for mobilization and exemptions onto the failing bureaucratic institutions responsible for the mobilization. The Kremlin is downplaying the widespread violations of the mobilization law as individual errors of local authorities, claiming to correct these errors as citizens call attention to them. The violations are clearly too common to be merely the result of individual errors, however, and Russian citizens can see them all too clearly. Unlike Russian failures in Ukraine, which the Kremlin has been able to minimize or deflect because its citizens cannot see them directly, violations of the mobilization decree are evident to many Russians. Word of these violations does not even require access to media or social media, because they are occurring in so many locations and victims’ families can spread their anguish by word of mouth.

Russian state media has begun acknowledging social media complaints of persistent problems with the mobilization process, largely pinning the blame on the supposedly unmotivated and careless employees of the military recruitment centers.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian propagandists and heads of federal subjects are actively discussing instances of wrongful mobilization of men older than the maximum mobilizable age, those who had never served, and those who have medical conditions, as well as poor treatment of mobilized individuals. Omsk Oblast Governor Alexander Burkov declaimed that the bureaucracy is the “enemy of patriotism” and blamed bureaucrats for focusing on meeting unstated quotas rather than correctly fulfilling Russian President Vladimir Putin’s partial mobilization order.<sup>[2]</sup> One state television host threatened to punish workers of military recruitment centers if they fail to abide by the limited reservist mobilization order.<sup>[3]</sup> The Kremlin’s media outlets and voices are increasingly sharing

individual stories in which military recruitment centers released some men who were unfit for service following the involvement of local officials or with the help of Kremlin state media to suggest that errors are being corrected when called to the Kremlin's attention.[4]

**The Kremlin faces a daunting task in trying to calm the Russian people while still mobilizing enough men to keep fighting.** The Kremlin's current narrative aims to assuage its distraught and panicking population with the promise of fixing and punishing bureaucratic institutions for widespread "mistakes" in the mobilization campaign, but such messaging is unlikely to solve the Kremlin's problems. Putin will have to fix (or convincingly appear to fix) the mobilization bureaucracy sprawling across 11 time zones while simultaneously getting it to meet the mobilization quotas he has set for it to support the war effort. These imperatives are likely mutually exclusive in a short period of time. The Kremlin also risks further undermining this critical bureaucratic institution during an important period by continuously blaming it for failures that are likely not entirely of its making. Some Russians are already directing their anger onto enlistment officials; a man who opposed mobilization shot the head of the Ust-Ilimsk military recruitment office in Irkutsk Oblast on September 26.[5]

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Special Edition on Russian Mobilization

Frederick W. Kagan

September 25, 6 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

This campaign assessment special edition focuses on Russian military mobilization efforts. Significant inflections ISW would normally cover in its regular sections will be summarized briefly today and addressed in more detail tomorrow.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to overcome fundamental structural challenges in attempting to mobilize large numbers of Russians to continue his war in Ukraine. The "partial mobilization" he ordered on September 21 will generate additional forces but inefficiently and with high domestic social and political costs. The forces generated by this "partial mobilization," critically, are very unlikely to add substantially to the Russian military's net combat power in 2022. Putin will have to fix basic flaws in the Russian military personnel and equipment systems if mobilization is to have any significant impact even in the longer term. His actions thus far suggest that he is far more concerned with rushing bodies to the battlefield than with addressing these fundamental flaws.

**The Russian Armed Forces have not been setting conditions for an effective large-scale mobilization since at least 2008 and have not been building the kind of reserve force needed for a snap mobilization intended to produce immediate effects on the battlefield. There are no rapid solutions to these problems.**

**The problems Putin confronts stem in part from long-standing unresolved tensions in the Russian approach to generating military manpower.** Russian and Soviet military manpower policies from 1874 through 2008 were designed to support the full mass mobilization of the entire Russian and Soviet populations for full-scale war. Universal conscription and a minimum two-year service obligation was intended to ensure that virtually all military-age males received sufficient training and experience in combat specialties that they could be recalled to active service after serving their terms and rapidly go to war as effective soldiers. Most Russian and Soviet combat units were kept in a "cadre" status in peacetime—they retained a nearly full complement of officers and many non-commissioned officers, along with a small number of soldiers. Russian and Soviet doctrine and strategy required large-scale reserve mobilization to fill out these cadre units in wartime. This cadre-and-reserve approach to military manpower was common among continental European powers from the end of the 19th century through the Cold War.

**The Russian military tried to move to an all-volunteer basis amid the 2008 financial crisis and failed to make the transition fully.** The end of the Cold War and the demonstration in the 1991 Gulf War of the virtues of an all-volunteer military led many states to transition away from conscription models. The Russian military remained committed to the cadre-and-reserve model until 2008, when Putin directed his newly appointed Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov to move the Russian military to a professional model and reform it to save costs following the 2008 financial crisis.[1] One

such cost-cutting measure reduced the term of mandatory conscript service to 18 months in 2007 and then to one year in 2008.

**The Russian military ended up with a hybrid model blending conscript and professional soldiers.** Professional militaries are expensive because the state must offer prospective voluntary recruits far higher salaries and benefits than it gives to conscripts, who have no choice but to serve. Serdyukov quickly found that the Russian defense budget could not afford to offer enticements sufficient to overcome the centuries-old Russian resistance to military service. The Russian military thus became a mix of volunteer professional soldiers, whom the Russians call *kontraktniki*, and one-year conscripts.

**The reduction in the mandatory term of service for conscripts made Russia's reserves less combat ready.** Conscripts normally reach a bare minimum of military competence within a year—the lost second year is the period in which a cadre-and-reserve military would normally bring its conscripts to a meaningful level of combat capability. The shift to a one-year term of mandatory military service in 2008 means that the last classes of Russian men who served two-year terms are now in their early 30s. Younger men in the prime age brackets for being recalled to fight served only the abbreviated one-year period.

**The prioritization of building a professional force and the de-prioritization of conscript service likely translated into an erosion of the bureaucratic structures required for mobilization.**

Mobilization is always a bureaucratically challenging undertaking. It requires local officials throughout the entire country to perform well a task they may never conduct and rehearse rarely, if at all. Maintaining the bureaucratic infrastructure required to conduct a large-scale reserve call-up requires considerable attention from senior leadership—attention it likely did not receive in Russia over the last 15 years or so.

**Putin has already conducted at least four attempts at mobilization in the last year, likely draining the pool of available combat-ready (and willing) reservists ahead of the “partial mobilization.”**

- The Russian military launched an initiative called the Russian Combat Army Reserve (the Russian acronym is BARS) in fall 2021 with the aim of recruiting 100,000 volunteers into an organization that would train them and keep them combat-capable while still in the reserves. [2] This effort largely failed, generating only a fraction of its target by the time of the Russian invasion in February 2022.
- The Russian Armed Forces conducted an involuntary mobilization of part of its regular reserve in preparation for the invasion and in parallel with the BARS effort. Details about the pre-invasion call-up are scarce, but Western officials reported that the Russian military had recalled “tens of thousands” of reservists to fill out units before rolling into Ukraine.[3]
- A third, smaller mobilization wave followed the invasion itself, as reports emerged of thousands of reservists being called up to make good Russian losses in early March 2022.[4]
- Putin launched a fourth effort at mobilizing his population for war in June 2022, accelerated in July, with a call for the formation of “volunteer battalions.”[5] This undertaking was an ad hoc attempt at crypto mobilization. The Kremlin directed all of Russia’s “federal subjects” (administrative units at the province level on the whole) to generate at least one volunteer battalion each and to pay enlistment and combat bonuses out of their own budgets. This effort has generated a number of volunteer battalions, some of which have fought in Ukraine, albeit poorly.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 24, 9 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's declarations about which categories of Russian males will be exempted from partial mobilization may not reflect Russian President Vladimir Putin's intentions or orders.** A Russian media insider claimed on September 24 that officials of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reprimanded military commissars in person for negligence in carrying out mobilization and sending out summonses in “excess,” and contrary to the explicit MoD

guidance regarding exemptions for age, disability, or other limiting factors.<sup>[1]</sup> Another Russian source claimed that certain heads of federal subjects acknowledged that they have mobilized citizens who are technically ineligible.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Responsibility for the partial mobilization appears to be divided and complex, possibly contributing to confusion, disorganization, and violations of Shoigu's commitments regarding exemptions.** The mobilization decree specifies that Russian federal subjects are responsible for executing the mobilization while the MoD sets quotas and deadlines for filling them.<sup>[3]</sup> A Russian milblogger, in fact, criticized the governor of Russia's Belgorod Oblast for not being an active participant in the mobilization process and noted that the mobilization decree places the onus of carrying out mobilization orders on the heads of federal subjects and not on military commissars.<sup>[4]</sup> Military commissars likely work for the heads of federal subjects, however, rather than directly for the MoD, making both responsible for mobilization and creating a possible gap between them and the Defense Ministry.

**The military commissars are generally acting as if they had received orders to prioritize getting bodies to training centers over adhering to Shoigu's guidelines, and the seemingly confused chains of responsibility for executing the mobilization decree may be responsible for the divergence between Shoigu's statements and commissars' actions.** Shoigu emphatically reiterated on September 21 that mobilization is partial and will only rely on those already in the reserve and with combat experience and military experience, but military commissars failed to adhere to Shoigu's guidance, practically from the onset of the mobilization order.<sup>[5]</sup> Continued reports of military commissars conducting chaotic distribution of mobilization summonses indicate that they feel significant pressure to carry out mobilization as quickly as possible. Ukrainian sources reported that Russian authorities are immediately mobilizing individuals in occupied areas of Ukraine after "rewarding" them with Russian passports for participating in sham referenda rather than waiting until annexation makes the mobilization of eligible males in Russian-occupied areas legal under Russian law. This haste suggests that military commissars feel pressure to expedite mobilization which is not reflected in Shoigu's statements.<sup>[6]</sup> The MoD is evidently not in full control of mobilization, raising questions about which Russian males actually will be mobilized and how effective the mobilized force will be.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Positions held by senior Russian military leadership are continuing to change hands, suggesting that Russian President Vladimir Putin is continuing to see systemic problems as the result of the personal failings of senior subordinates.** The Russian MoD reported on September 24 that Colonel-General Mikhail Mizintsev has been appointed Deputy Defense Minister and will oversee logistics for the Russian Armed Forces, replacing Army General Dmitry Bulgakov.<sup>[8]</sup> Mizintsev previously acted as head of the Russian National Defense Control Center and served during Russian operations in Syria, notably commanding troops on the operational-tactical level during the encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Mariupol.<sup>[9]</sup> The replacement of individual senior leaders is very unlikely to fix fundamental structural problems in the Russian military. It reflects Putin's personality-driven approach to leadership and relative disdain for system-building—both factors that contributed to the overall failures of the Russian military in this war.

**Russian forces may be preparing to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) to fight for Russia, which would constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War.** Russian state media reported on September 24 that Ukrainian POWs detained at the Olenivka prison camp orally "requested" Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) authorities to allow them to fight in the DNR's volunteer "Bohdan Khmelnytsky" Cossack Battalion.<sup>[10]</sup> If Russian or Russian proxy forces coerced Ukrainian POWs into combat, it would be a violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, which stipulates that "no prisoner of war may at any time be sent to or detained in areas where he may be exposed to the fire of the combat zone" and shall not "be employed on labour which is of an unhealthy or dangerous nature."<sup>[11]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Local military commissars are carrying out mobilization orders in a way that suggests a possible disconnect between Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's guidelines for partial mobilization and Russian President Vladimir Putin's demands for haste.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely continuing to address systemic issues in Russian senior command by replacing individual senior subordinates.
- Russia may be preparing to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian prisoners of war in what may constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued to make gains along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and northwest of Lyman.

- Ukrainian military officials indicated that the continued Ukrainian interdiction campaign in southern Ukraine is degrading Russian combat capabilities.
- Russian sources identified three locations where Ukrainian troops conducted ground operations in Kherson Oblast- northern Kherson Oblast, western Kherson Oblast near the Inhulets River, and northwest of Kherson City near the Mykolaiv-Kherson Oblast border.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks around Bakhmut, Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian authorities continue to coerce residents of occupied Ukrainian territory into voting in sham referenda.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 23, 10:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian mobilization system is struggling to execute the task Russian President Vladimir Putin set and will likely fail to produce mobilized reserve forces even of the low quality that Putin's plans would have generated unless the Kremlin can rapidly fix fundamental and systemic problems. Putin and Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that the Russian Armed Forces would mobilize combat-ready reservists to quickly stabilize the frontlines and regain the initiative on the battlefield.[1] Milblogger and social media reports, however, show that Russian military recruitment centers, enlistment officials, and local administrations are mobilizing men who do not meet the Kremlin's stated criteria, especially Shoigu's promise that mobilization would prioritize men with "combat experience." Russian opposition outlets and Telegram channels leaked information suggesting that the Kremlin aims to complete this partial mobilization by November 10 and that the Kremlin is seeking to mobilize 1.2 million men instead of the publicly announced 300,000.[2] ISW cannot verify these reports, but significant available information suggests that this mobilization campaign (the first in post-Soviet Russia) is overwhelming an ineffective and unmotivated bureaucratic system and could fail to generate the much-needed combat-ready reserve force in a short time or at all.

**Russian pro-war milbloggers and social media users are raising concerns about unlawful mobilization practices and showcasing many serious Russian mobilization problems on the second day of the mobilization effort.** Russian milbloggers reported receiving numerous complaints from social media users that older men, students, employees of military industries, and civilians with no prior military experience are receiving illegal mobilization notices.[3] Shoigu and other officials have repeatedly stated that these categories of individuals would be exempt from this partial mobilization. Other sources reported that Russians are mobilizing airport and airline employees and workers from other industries.[4] The Russian government FAQ portal also indicated that local mobilization-enforcing officials may mobilize part-time students, despite the Kremlin's declaration that no students will undergo mobilization.[5]

Some milbloggers noted that Russian enlistment personnel are assigning men with prior military service to very different specializations from those in which they served, while other sources recounted instances of military recruitment centers mobilizing men with chronic illnesses.[6]

The quality of Russian bureaucrats and military trainers are also raising fears among the Russian pro-war crowd that the partial mobilization effort may not succeed. Milbloggers noted that employees of the military enlistment centers are unmotivated and underpaid, reducing their enthusiasm to adhere to the envisioned mobilization plan. Milbloggers also pleaded with officers and commanders in charge of preparing mobilized men for war to train them before deployment.[7]

**Challenges and errors in the first days of executing a large-scale and demanding partial mobilization in the midst of a failing war are not necessarily surprising, although they suggest that the Russian military mobilization infrastructure was not better prepared for a major war than the Russian armed forces themselves.** It is nevertheless conceivable that the Russian Ministry of Defense will address some of the worst problems and get the mobilization effort on track. It is also possible, moreover, that much of the partial mobilization is proceeding more or less as planned and that social media and the milblogger community are highlighting problems that are serious but not

necessarily pervasive. Some of the reports suggest, however, that regional mobilization officials have been given quotas to fill and received pressure to fill them in ways that are more likely to cause errors than to reward adherence to the stated principles and the needs of an effective, combat-ready reserve force.

**Divergences from the mobilization decree and from Putin's and Shoigu's statements about the categories of men who are exempt from mobilization are also causing anger and mistrust toward Russian federal subjects and the Kremlin itself.** Some social media footage already shows mobilized men fighting with enlistment officers, arguing with mobilization representatives, and refusing to serve under unlawful orders.<sup>[8]</sup> Some milbloggers claimed that some of the discontented men who have been wrongfully mobilized would have accepted their fate if they had actually met the mobilization criterium.<sup>[9]</sup> The Kremlin is thus committing unmotivated and potentially angry men to war with the task of regaining the initiative in an offensive war in a foreign land on a battlefield far from home.

**The highly nationalist and pro-war milblogger community is calling on the Kremlin to address these mobilization issues rapidly, but the Kremlin is unlikely to be able to meet their demands.** Russian milbloggers express cautious optimism that partial mobilization will reinforce degraded combat units and allow Russian forces to advance in Donetsk Oblast, but are concerned that the Kremlin's failures to enforce mobilization according to the law and stated policies will create political unrest.<sup>[10]</sup> One milblogger stated that the Kremlin's poor handling of the partial mobilization is giving rise to "separatist movements" and opposition media.<sup>[11]</sup> Another milblogger noted that the Kremlin's failure to fix mobilization practices within the military recruitment centers may shatter Russians' trust in the military-political leadership.<sup>[12]</sup> A failed or badly flawed partial mobilization campaign may risk further alienation of the Russian nationalist crowd that has been supportive of the war and mobilization.

**Disparate mobilization processes across different regions may exacerbate social tensions in Russia already raised by perceived inequalities in the creation of volunteer battalions.** Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov stated in a live TV broadcast that the Republic of Chechnya will not conduct mobilization because the Republic has already exceeded an unspecified force generation plan by 254 percent.<sup>[13]</sup> Kadyrov added that Chechnya has already deployed 20,000 servicemen to war since February 24. Kadyrov threatened to mobilize any protesters in Chechnya and send them to the front, however. Kadyrov then seemingly modified his statements by encouraging those opposing mobilization to respect Russian sovereignty instead of using the constitution to avoid service.<sup>[14]</sup> Kadyrov's initial statement, addressed to the Chechen public, may be an attempt to both address and discourage criticism of mobilization, the war, and himself within the Chechen community. Kadyrov's statement could also be a worrisome indicator for the Kremlin—if one of the war's most vociferous and aggressive advocates feels the need to refuse to mobilize his people, at least publicly, that could indicate that even Kadyrov senses the popular resentment the partial mobilization will cause and possibly even fears it.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian partial mobilization efforts are suffering from serious and systemic problems in their first days, generating popular resentment and setting conditions to produce a mobilized reserve force incapable of accomplishing the tasks Russian President Vladimir Putin has set for it.
- Protests, attacks against recruiting centers, and vandalism have occurred across Russia in the first 48 hours after the announcement of partial mobilization.
- Ukrainian forces continued to advance north and northwest of Lyman.
- Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast and maintained operational silence regarding Ukrainian progress on the axis.
- Russian forces continued to launch unsuccessful assaults near Bakhmut and northwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down an Iranian-made Mohajer-6 drone in an unspecified area of the Black Sea, likely near Odesa.
- Russian occupation authorities began the voting period for their sham annexation referenda on September 23 with overt coercion and falsified turnout numbers.
- Russian occupation authorities remained on high alert to prevent partisan attacks against sham election workers, polling stations, and government facilities.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 21**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

September 22, 8:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Kremlin's heavy-handed approach to partial mobilization may successfully meet the Kremlin's internal quota of mobilized personnel but is unlikely to generate effective soldiers and is prompting significant domestic backlash for little gain.** Russian authorities are forcibly recruiting Russian citizens to fight in Ukraine on flimsy pretexts, violating the Kremlin's promise to recruit only those with military experience. Russian authorities are also demonstrably mobilizing personnel (such as protesters) who will enter the war in Ukraine with abysmal morale. The Kremlin's heavy-handed approach to partial mobilization will likely exacerbate domestic resentment of a measure that would have been unpopular even if implemented without the harsh approaches observed in the last 24 hours.

**The Kremlin is openly not adhering to its promised conditions for partial mobilization just 24 hours after its September 21 declaration** Russian officials previously claimed that partial mobilization will only impact 300,000 men, and only those with previous military experience.<sup>[1]</sup> Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on September 22 that the practice of administering mobilization notices to detained protesters does not contradict the September 21 mobilization law. Peskov's threat contravenes the Kremlin's claim that it will abstain from mobilizing men outside of composed reservist lists.<sup>[2]</sup> Western and Russian opposition media outlets reported instances of Russian military commissioners administering draft notices to protesters in Moscow and Voronezh.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian opposition outlets also reported on a bank IT specialist who had received a draft notice despite never having served in the army or attended military-education courses in university.<sup>[4]</sup> The IT specialist is likely one of many Russian men who received mobilization notices despite not meeting the stated criteria for partial mobilization. A university student in Buryatia released footage of Rosgvardia and military police pulling students from lessons, reportedly for mobilization, despite Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu repeatedly stating that Russian students will not be mobilized.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Kremlin quotas will likely force local officials to mobilize any men, regardless of their military status, to meet quota numbers.** The quota for mobilized men remains unverifiable, with Kremlin officials claiming that Russia will mobilize only 300,000 men and Russian opposition outlets' sources suggesting that the number might reach a million.<sup>[6]</sup> Regardless of the total quota, the Russian federal subjects executing the mobilization order will likely undertake recruitment measures outside of the outlined reservist call up. Some Russian federal subjects such as the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and Kursk Oblast are imposing laws restricting reservists from leaving their places of permanent residence.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian enlistment officers and police are also reportedly enforcing unscrupulous mobilization practices (as ISW previously observed during their crypto-mobilization campaigns) by calling up men by phone, issuing notices in the middle of the night, and notifying men of their mobilization via state social benefits websites.<sup>[8]</sup>

**The Kremlin will also likely mobilize ethnically non-Russian and immigrant communities at a disproportional rate.** A member of the Kremlin's Russian Human Rights Council, Kirill Kabanov,<sup>[9]</sup> proposed mandatory military service for Central Asian immigrants that have received Russian citizenship within the last ten years, threatening to confiscate their Russian citizenship if they do not mobilize.<sup>[10]</sup> *Current Time* reported that residents of Kurumkan, a village in the Republic of Buryatia, noted that Russian enlistment officers mobilized about 700 men of the total population of 5,500 people.<sup>[11]</sup> If witness reports from Kurumkan are accurate, they would indicate that Russian officials mobilized about 25% of the male population from a single village in a majority ethnically Buryat district. An Armenian Telegram channel published a mobilization list from Tuapse, Krasnodar Krai that reportedly consists of 90% ethnically Armenian residents, despite the town's total Armenian community being only 8.5% of the population.<sup>[12]</sup>

**The Kremlin's heavy-handed approach to mobilization is prompting public anger and distrust across Russia.** Independent Russian human rights outlet *OVD-Info* reported that protests took place in 42 cities across the country, including protests even in small villages in the Republic of Dagestan.<sup>[13]</sup> Unidentified assailants set fire to several military recruitment centers and local administration buildings in Nizhny Novgorod, St. Petersburg, Tolyatti, and Zabaikalsky Krai.<sup>[14]</sup> The Kremlin will likely subdue such protests in the coming days. However, declaration of partial mobilization and blatant disregard for even the government-dictated parameters for the mobilization may alienate concerned swathes of the Russian public who were previously more tolerant of the less personally impactful Russian invasion of Ukraine.

**The Kremlin likely attempted to downplay a prisoner swap with Ukraine that is deeply unpopular among Russian nationalists and milbloggers by undertaking the swap the same day**

**Putin announced partial mobilization.** The Kremlin exchanged 215 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs), including captured foreign nationals and Azov Battalion leaders, for at least 55 Russian POWs and political prisoners, including Putin's personal friend, Ukrainian billionaire Viktor Medvedchuk, on September 21.<sup>[14]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed on September 22 that Russian and DNR and LNR POWs were in "mortal danger" in Ukrainian custody.<sup>[15]</sup> Far-right Russian milbloggers criticized the exchange and asked if the Kremlin had given up on the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine, one of the stated goals of the Russian invasion.<sup>[16]</sup> Kremlin propagandists had heavily publicized the capture and planned prosecution of Azov personnel, accusing them of being Ukrainian Nazis. Other milbloggers criticized the Kremlin for enabling what they called Ukrainian information operations and "allowing Kyiv to manipulate the mood in Russia."<sup>[17]</sup> Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov described the exchange as "incomprehensible," implied that Chechen forces tortured Azov prisoners in captivity, and implied that Russian forces who capture "Nazis" should kill them rather than taking them as POWs if they will be traded back to Ukraine.<sup>[18]</sup> Torturing or killing POWs is a war crime and a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

**The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that it began negotiations to establish a nuclear safety zone around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). Such negotiations are unlikely to significantly ameliorate the situation due to continued Russian efforts to stage provocations at the plant.** IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi stated on September 22 that the IAEA has begun "productive conversations" with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and French President Emmanuel Macron in order to establish a Nuclear Safety and Protection Zone at the ZNPP.<sup>[19]</sup> Despite the positive intentions of external negotiators, Russian forces may use negotiations as an opportunity to stage further provocations at the ZNPP and accuse Ukrainian troops of endangering safety of the plant, as they have repeatedly done in the past. As ISW has previously reported, Russian forces previously exploited the IAEA presence at the ZNPP in order to accuse Ukraine of disregard for nuclear safety and blame Ukrainian forces for shelling the plant, despite being unable to provide visual evidence to support their accusations.<sup>[20]</sup> Russian authorities may seek to leverage the IAEA negotiations to accuse Ukraine of nuclear irresponsibility in an attempt to degrade continued Western support to Ukraine.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Kremlin's heavy-handed approach to partial mobilization may successfully meet the Kremlin's internal quota of mobilized personnel, but is unlikely to generate effective soldiers and is prompting significant domestic backlash for little gain.
- The Kremlin is openly not adhering to its promised conditions for partial mobilization.
- Kremlin quotas will likely force local officials to mobilize any men, regardless of their military status, to meet quota numbers and will likely incentivize the mobilization of ethnically non-Russian and immigrant communities at a disproportional rate.
- The Kremlin likely attempted to downplay a prisoner swap with Ukraine that is deeply unpopular among Russian nationalists and milbloggers by undertaking the swap the same day Putin announced partial mobilization.
- IAEA negotiations around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant are unlikely to significantly improve the situation at the plant and may provide an information opportunity for Russian forces to stage provocations.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued limited counteroffensive operations along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and continued attacks toward Lyman on September 22.
- Ukrainian military officials maintained their operational silence regarding Ukrainian ground attacks in Kherson Oblast on September 22 and reiterated that Ukrainian forces are conducting an operational-level interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the frontlines in Donetsk Oblast on September 22.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks west of Hulyapole on September 22 and continued routine strikes throughout western Zaporizhzhia Oblast.
- Russian occupation forces are hurriedly setting conditions to hold sham annexation referenda across occupied Ukraine from September 23-27.
- Russian officials created polling stations in parts of Russia, ostensibly to enable displaced (in many cases meaning kidnapped) Ukrainian residents of occupied territories to "vote."
- Russian occupation officials in Ukraine likely expect to be forced to provide personnel to meet Russian regional mobilization quotas after the Kremlin annexes occupied Ukrainian territories.

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mapes, Mason Clark, Kat Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 21, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of "partial mobilization" on September 21 reflected many problems Russia faces in its faltering invasion of Ukraine that Moscow is unlikely to be able to resolve in the coming months.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin's order to mobilize part of Russia's "trained" reserve, that is, individuals who have completed their mandatory conscript service, will not generate significant usable Russian combat power for months. It may suffice to sustain the current levels of Russian military manpower in 2023 by offsetting Russian casualties, although even that is not yet clear. It will occur in deliberate phases, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said in an interview on September 21, likely precluding any sudden influx of Russian forces that could dramatically shift the tide of the war.<sup>[2]</sup> Russia's partial mobilization will thus not deprive Ukraine of the opportunity to liberate more of its occupied territory into and through the winter.

**Putin and Shoigu emphatically said that only reservists who have completed their initial military service will be mobilized, making clear that Russia will not be expanding conscription.** Shoigu also declared that students will not be affected and told them to go about their studies without concern.<sup>[3]</sup> These comments were clearly intended to allay fears among the Russian population that "partial mobilization" was code for general conscription.

**It is not clear how much of the Russian reserve has already been deployed to fight in Ukraine.** Western intelligence officials reportedly said in November 2021 that Russia had called up "tens of thousands of reservists" as part of its pre-war mobilization.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian military officials reported in June 2022 that Russian forces had committed 80,000 members of the mobilized reserve to fight in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> The Russian military likely called up the most combat-ready reserves in that pre-war mobilization effort, which suggests that the current partial mobilization will begin by drawing on less combat-ready personnel from the outset.

**Russian reserves are poorly trained to begin with and receive no refresher training once their conscription period is completed.** Russian mandatory military service is only one year, which gives conscripts little time to learn how to be soldiers, to begin with. The absence of refresher training after that initial period accelerates the degradation of learned soldier skills over time. Shoigu referred to the intent of calling up reservists with "combat experience," but very few Russian reservists other than those now serving in Ukraine have any combat experience.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Reports conflict regarding how much training reservists called up in the partial mobilization will receive.** Shoigu described a deliberate training process that would familiarize or re-familiarize mobilized reservists with crew, team, detachment, and then platoon-level operations before deploying them to fight. That process should take weeks, if not months, to bring reservists from civilian life to war readiness. Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security head Viktor Bondarev reportedly said that mobilized reservists would train for over a month before being deployed.<sup>[7]</sup> A military commissariat in Kursk Oblast, on the other hand, reportedly announced that reservists under 30 would deploy immediately with no additional training.<sup>[8]</sup>

**Putin emphatically did not say that the Russian nuclear umbrella would cover annexed areas of Ukraine nor did he tie mobilization to the annexation.** He addressed partial mobilization, annexation referenda in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, and the possibility of nuclear war in his speech—but as separate topics rather than a coherent whole. The fact that he mentioned all three topics in a single speech was clearly meant to suggest a linkage, but he went out of his way to avoid making any such linkage explicit.

Putin framed his comments about the possibility of Russian nuclear weapons use in the context of supposed Western threats to use nuclear weapons against Russia. He claimed that Western officials were talking about "the possibility and permissibility of using weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons—against Russia." He continued, "I wish to remind those who allow themselves such statements about Russia that our country also has various means of attack..." His comment on this topic concludes by noting that Russia would use all means at its disposal in response to a threat to "the territorial integrity of our country, for the defense of Russia and our people." That comment could be interpreted as applying in advance to the soon-to-be annexed areas of occupied Ukraine, but its

placement in the speech and context do not by any means make such an interpretation obvious. Nor is Putin's language in making this comment different from formal Kremlin policy or from previous statements by Russian officials. **Putin's speech should not be read as an explicit threat that Russia would use nuclear weapons against Ukraine if Ukraine continues counter-offensives against occupied territories after annexation.**

Putin did not connect annexation with the partial mobilization either, defending the need for partial mobilization by referring to the length of the lines along which Russian forces are now fighting and Western assistance to Ukraine. He noted that the front lines now stretch for more than a thousand kilometers to explain why more Russian forces are needed. He and Shoigu also heavily emphasized the false narrative that Russia is fighting not Ukraine but NATO and the West. This narrative is not new. It is not even markedly different from the initial false justifications Putin offered before ordering the invasion in February.<sup>[9]</sup> The formal Kremlin position has long been that NATO was pushing Ukraine to war with Russia, that NATO was preparing to give Ukraine nuclear weapons, and that NATO forces were taking up or preparing to take up positions in Ukraine. Putin's and Shoigu's repetitions of that line do not reflect an escalation in their rhetoric.

**Russia's partial mobilization will not transform the war this year and may or may not have a significant impact on Russia's ability to continue operations at their current level next year.** Ukraine and the West should neither dismiss it nor exaggerate it.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin's announced "partial mobilization" will not materially affect the course of the war in the coming months.
- Putin did *not* explicitly threaten to use nuclear weapons if Ukraine continues counter-offensive operations to liberate occupied areas after Russian annexation.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued offensive operations around Lyman.
- Ukrainian forces conducted strikes north and east of Kherson City as part of an operational-level interdiction campaign against Russian logistics, military, and transportation assets in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources identified three areas of kinetic activity on September 21: northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border around Vysokopillya.
- Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing crypto-mobilization efforts regardless of Russian President Vladimir Putin's declaration of partial mobilization.
- Russian-appointed occupation administrators are likely increasing law enforcement and filtration measures in occupied areas of Ukraine in preparation for Russia's sham annexation referenda.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 20, 8:45pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian-appointed occupation officials in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts announced on September 20 that they will hold a "referendum" on acceding to Russia, with a vote taking place from September 23-27.<sup>[1]</sup> The Kremlin will use the falsified results of these sham referenda to illegally annex all Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine and is likely to declare unoccupied parts of Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts to be part of Russia as well.

The Kremlin's annexation plans are primarily targeting a domestic audience; Putin likely hopes to improve Russian force generation capabilities by calling on the Russian people to volunteer for a war to "defend" newly claimed Russian territory. Putin and his advisors have apparently realized that current Russian forces are insufficient to conquer Ukraine and that efforts to build large forces quickly through voluntary mobilization are culminating short of the Russian military's force requirements. Putin is therefore likely setting legal and informational conditions to improve Russian force generation without resorting to expanded conscription by changing the balance of carrots and sticks the Kremlin has been using to spur voluntary recruitment.

**Putin may believe that he can appeal to Russian ethnonationalism and the defense of purportedly “Russian peoples” and claimed Russian land to generate additional volunteer forces.** He may seek to rely on enhanced rhetoric in part because the Kremlin cannot afford the service incentives, like bonuses and employment benefits, that it has already promised Russian recruits.[2] But Putin is also adding new and harsher punishments in an effort to contain the risk of the collapse of Russian military units fighting in Ukraine and draft-dodging within Russia. The Kremlin rushed the passage of a new law through the State Duma on September 20, circumventing normal parliamentary procedures.[3] This law codifies dramatically increased penalties for desertion, refusing conscription orders, and insubordination. It also criminalizes voluntary surrender and makes surrender a crime punishable by ten years in prison. **The law notably does not order full-scale mobilization or broader conscription or make any preparations for such activities.**

**ISW has observed no evidence that the Kremlin is imminently intending to change its conscription practices. The Kremlin’s new law is about strengthening the Kremlin’s coercive volunteerism, or what Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov called “self-mobilization.”[4]**

The Kremlin is taking steps to directly increase force generation through continued voluntary self-mobilization and an expansion of its legal authority to deploy Russian conscripts already with the force to fight in Ukraine.

- **Putin’s illegal annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory will broaden the domestic legal definition of “Russian” territory under Russian law, enabling the Russian military to legally and openly deploy conscripts already in the Russian military to fight in eastern and southern Ukraine.** Russian leadership has already deployed undertrained conscripts to Ukraine in direct violation of Russian law and faced domestic backlash.[5] Russia’s semi-annual conscription cycle usually generates around 130,000 conscripts twice per year.[6] The next cycle runs from October 1 to December 31. Russian law generally requires that conscripts receive at least four months of training prior to deployment overseas, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly denied that conscripts will be deployed to Ukraine.[7] Annexation could provide him a legal loophole allowing for the overt deployment of conscripts to fight.
- **Russian-appointed occupation officials in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts announced the formation of “volunteer” units to fight with the Russian military against Ukraine.** [8] Russian forces will likely coerce or physically force at least some Ukrainian men in occupied areas to fight in these units, as they have done in the territories of the Russian proxy Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR).
- **The Russian State Duma separately passed new incentives for foreign nationals to fight in Russia’s military to obtain Russian citizenship and will likely increase overseas recruitment accordingly.**[9] That new law, which deputies also rushed through normal procedures on September 20, allows foreign nationals to gain Russian citizenship by signing a contract and serving in the Russian military for one year. Russian law previously required three years of service to apply for citizenship.
- **Putin’s appeals to nationalism may generate small increases in volunteer recruitment from within Russia and parts of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk.** However, forces generated from such volunteers, if they manifest, will be small and poorly trained. Most eager and able-bodied Russian men and Ukrainian collaborators have likely already volunteered in one of the earlier recruitment phases.
- **Local Russian administrators will continue to attempt to form volunteer units, with decreasing effect, as ISW has previously reported and mapped.**[10]
- **Russian forces and the Wagner Private Military Company are also directly recruiting from Russian prisons, as ISW has previously reported.**[11] These troops will be undisciplined and unlikely to meaningfully increase Russian combat power.

**Putin likely hopes that increasing self-mobilization, and cracking down on unwilling Russian forces, will enable him to take the rest of Donetsk and defend Russian-occupied parts of Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts. He is mistaken.** Putin has neither the time nor the resources needed to generate effective combat power. But Putin will likely wait to see if these efforts are successful before either escalating further or blaming his loss on a scapegoat. His most likely scapegoat is Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the Russian Ministry of Defense. Reports that Shoigu would accompany Putin while Putin gave a speech announced and then postponed on September 20 suggest that Putin intended to make Shoigu the face of the current effort.[12]

**Russian President Vladimir Putin likely also intends to deter Ukraine’s ongoing counteroffensives by annexing occupied Ukrainian territory and framing Ukrainian attempts to liberate occupied territory as attacks on Russia.** Russian officials and propagandists such as Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev issued vague warnings on September 20 that “the infringement of Russian territory is a crime; committing this crime permits using all means

of self-defense.”[13] Russian officials are demonstrably panicked over Ukrainian advances, as ISW assessed on September 19.[14] The Kremlin likely intends these vague warnings to exacerbate Ukrainian and global fears of nuclear escalation. However, Putin has already declined to enforce any territory-specific redlines in response to Ukrainian attacks on Russian-annexed Crimea, occupied territory he has controlled for eight years and declares to be Russian.

Ukrainian and Western leaders responded to reports of the impending referenda with renewed declarations of commitment to restoring Ukrainian sovereignty over occupied Ukrainian territory. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated on September 20 that “sham ‘referendums’ will not change anything … Ukraine has every right to liberate its territories and will keep liberating them whatever Russia has to say.”[15] NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on September 20 that “[sham referendums] will only further worsen the situation, and therefore we need to provide more support to Ukraine.”[16] US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on September 20 that the United States “will never recognize this territory as anything other than a part of Ukraine” and will continue to provide “historic support” to Ukraine.[17] German Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasized on September 19 that “Ukraine has every right to defend the sovereignty and integrity of its own territory and its own democracy.”[18] French President Emmanuel Macron called the sham referenda a “parody” and a “provocation.”

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian-appointed occupation officials in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts announced on September 20 that they will hold a “referendum” on acceding to Russia, with a vote taking place from September 23-27.
- The Kremlin’s annexation plans are primarily targeting a domestic audience; Putin likely intends to improve Russian force generation capabilities by calling on the Russian people to volunteer for a war ostensibly to defend newly-claimed Russian territory.
- Ukrainian forces continued disrupting ongoing Russian efforts to reestablish ground lines of communications (GLOCs) across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces are likely targeting Ukrainian hydrotechnical infrastructure in Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts to threaten Ukrainian positions along the Siverskyi Donets River.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on September 20.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks west of Hulyaipole on September 20 and continued routine artillery strikes throughout Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian forces continue to degrade their force generation capabilities by cannibalizing training elements to fight in combat formations in Ukraine.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Mason Clark, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 19, 9 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Urgent discussion on September 19 among Russia’s proxies of the need for Russia to immediately annex Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (much of the latter of which is not under Russian control) suggests that Ukraine’s ongoing northern counter-offensive is panicking proxy forces and some Kremlin decision-makers. The legislatures of Russia’s proxies in occupied Ukraine, the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR), each called on their leadership to “immediately” hold a referendum on recognizing the DNR and LNR as Russian subjects. [1] Russian propagandist and *RT* Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan spoke glowingly of the call, referring to it as the “Crimean scenario.” She wrote that by recognizing occupied Ukrainian land as Russian territory, Russia could more easily threaten NATO with retaliatory strikes for Ukrainian counterattacks, “unting Russia’s hands in all respects.”[2]

This approach is incoherent. Russian forces do not control all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Annexing the claimed territories of the DNR and LNR would, therefore, have Russia annex oblasts that would be by Kremlin definition partially “occupied” by legitimate Ukrainian authorities and advancing Ukrainian forces. Ukrainian strikes into Russian-annexed Crimea clearly demonstrate that Ukrainian attacks on Russia’s illegally annexed territory do not automatically trigger Russian retaliation against NATO, as Simonyan would have her readers believe. **Partial annexation at this stage would also place the Kremlin in the strange position of demanding that Ukrainian forces un-occupy**

**“Russian” territory, and the humiliating position of being unable to enforce that demand. It remains very unclear that Russian President Vladimir Putin would be willing to place himself in such a bind for the dubious benefit of making it easier to threaten NATO or Ukraine with escalation he remains highly unlikely to conduct at this stage.**

Russian leadership may be running out of ways to try to stop Ukrainian forces as they advance across the Oskil River in Luhansk Oblast. The Kremlin may believe that partial annexation could drive recruitment of additional forces, both from within Russia and from within newly annexed Ukrainian territory. Russian forces are desperately attempting to mobilize additional forces from all potential sources to backfill their heavily degraded and demoralized units but have proven unable to generate significant combat power, as ISW has repeatedly written.[3]

This latest annexation discussion also omits other parts of Russian-occupied southern Ukraine in which the Kremlin was previously planning sham annexation referenda. A willingness to abandon the promise to bring all the occupied areas into Russia at the same time would be a significant retreat for Putin to make in the eyes of the hardline pro-war groups he appears to be courting. It remains to be seen if he is willing to compromise himself internally in such a fashion. The Kremlin's proxies in Donbas regularly outpace Kremlin messaging, on the other hand, and may have done so again as they scramble to retain their occupied territory in the face of Ukraine's successful and ongoing counter-offensive.

**Recent Ukrainian counter-offensive successes are further reducing the already poor morale among Russian units that had been considered elite before February 24.** Independent Belarusian media outlet *Vot Tak* posted images of intercepted documents left behind by Russian soldiers of Unit 31135 of the 1st Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 2nd Guards Motor Rifle Division as they fled Izyum en masse.[4] The signed documents (dated to August 30, prior to Ukraine's counter-offensive in Kharkiv on September 7) include written pleas to commanders of Unit 31135 to dismiss the letters' authors due to persistent “physical and moral fatigue.”[5] Ukrainian intelligence claimed that 90% of the personnel of the 1st Motorized Rifle Regiment wrote damning reports on the state of morale as early as May 23, 2022.[6] The 2nd Guards Motor Rifle Division is one of three divisions of the 1st Guards Tank Army, which, prior to the current war in Ukraine, was considered Russia's premier mechanized force and was to be Russia's key force in a large-scale conventional war with NATO. [7] The intercepted letters indicate pervasive morale issues among Russia's most elite units and the degradation of Russia's conventional capabilities against NATO.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Urgent discussion on September 19 among Russia's proxies of the need for Russia to immediately annex Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (much of the latter of which are not under Russian control) suggests that Ukraine's ongoing northern counter-offensive is panicking proxy forces and some Kremlin decision-makers.
- Ukrainian counter-offensive successes are degrading morale among Russian units that were regarded as elite prior to the invasion of Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces are likely continuing limited and localized offensive operations across the Oskil River and along the Lyman-Yampil-Bilohorivka line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks south of Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces are continuing to strike Russian military, transportation, and logistics assets in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources identified three areas of kinetic activity on September 19: northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and in northern Kherson Oblast near Olhine.
- The size of volunteer units Russia can generate is likely decreasing.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 18**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 18, 9:35 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is increasingly relying on irregular volunteer and proxy forces rather than conventional units and formations of the Russian Federation Armed

**Forces.** ISW has previously reported that Putin has been bypassing the Russian higher military command and Ministry of Defense leadership throughout the summer and especially following the defeat around Kharkiv Oblast.[1] Putin's souring relationship with the military command and the Russian (MoD) may explain in part the Kremlin's increasing focus on recruiting ill-prepared volunteers into ad-hoc irregular units rather than attempting to draw them into reserve or replacement pools for regular Russian combat units.

A prominent Russian milblogger reported that Russian forces have "already began the process of forming and staffing the 4th Army Corps, at least on a documentation level."<sup>[2]</sup> The report may be true given the recent Russia-wide push for the formation of more regional volunteer units among the Kremlin representatives following the Russian defeat around Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian federal subjects had previously begun advertising for contract service in volunteer units around the time of the formation of the 3rd Army Corps.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian forces are also increasingly recruiting prisoners, involving Cossack units, deploying elements of Russian security services such as the Russian Federal Security Service and Rosgvardia, and covertly mobilizing men from occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The continued focus on the formation of irregular units is receiving some criticism from retired Russian officers who are calling for proper conventional divisions rather than volunteer battalions.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The formation of such ad-hoc units will lead to further tensions, inequality, and an overall lack of cohesiveness between forces.** Ukrainian and Russian sources have reported instances of Russian Armed Forces refusing to pay veteran benefits, one-time enlistment bonuses, or provide medical treatment to BARS (Russian Combat Army Reserve) servicemen.<sup>[6]</sup> Some military formations offer financial incentives for every kilometer that the serviceman's unit advances, an incentive that few soldiers will likely benefit from considering that Russian forces are on the defensive almost everywhere apart from the areas around Bakhmut and Donetsk City, where gains have been slow and very limited.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian opposition publication *Insider* reported instances of ethnic discrimination within Chechen units, noting that the Chechen leadership deploys non-Chechens to the frontlines before committing Chechens to the battle.<sup>[8]</sup> Professional military staff are likely to confront behavioral issues among recruited prisoners, especially considering the likely prevalence of prisoners convicted of violent crimes, narcotics, and rape. The Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (LNR and DNR) have both previously refused to fight for each other's territory.<sup>[9]</sup> All these groups have different levels of military training, decentralized command structures, and different perceptions of the war and motivations to fight, which makes conflict and poor unit coordination more probable. The one thing they have in common is wholly inadequate training and preparation for combat.

**The formation of irregular, hastily-trained units adds little effective combat power to Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.** *Forbes* noted that the 3rd Army Corps rushed in to defend Russian positions around Kharkiv Oblast during the counteroffensive but failed to make any difference and "melted away."<sup>[10]</sup> The reported arrival of increasing numbers of irregular Russian forces on the battlefield has had little to no impact on Russian operations.

**Russian forces are likely attempting to conduct a more deliberate and controlled withdrawal in western Kherson Oblast to avoid the chaotic flight that characterized the collapse of Russian defensive positions in Kharkiv Oblast earlier this month.** The Russians have heavily reinforced western Kherson Oblast over the past several months including with airborne units and at least some elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army.<sup>[11]</sup> These ostensibly more professional and well-trained and equipped units are concentrated in a small area in Kherson Oblast and were prepared for the expected counteroffensive. They appear to be performing significantly better than Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast. The Ukrainians destroyed a number of units of the 1st Guards Tank Army in Kharkiv Oblast, putting them to flight and capturing large amounts of high-quality equipment. The worse performance of professional Russian soldiers in Kharkiv Oblast compared with those in Kherson Oblast may be due to the thinner concentration of Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast as well as the fact that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast appeared to surprise the Russian defenders.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast is nevertheless making progress, and Russian forces appear to be attempting to slow it and fall back to more defensible positions rather than stop it cold or reverse it. Continuous Ukrainian attacks on Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) across the Dnipro River to western Kherson Oblast appear to be having increasing effects on Russian supplies on the right bank—recent reports indicate shortages of food and water in Russian-occupied Kherson City and at least a temporary slackening of Russian artillery fire. Poor-quality proxy units have collapsed in some sectors of the Russian front lines, moreover, allowing Ukrainian advances. Ukrainian forces remain likely to regain much if not all of western Kherson Oblast in the coming weeks if they continue to interdict Russian GLOCs and press their advance. Ukrainian gains may continue to be slow if the Russian troops can retain their coherence but could also accelerate significantly if Russian forces begin to break.

A prominent Russian milblogger also claimed that the Russian command issued a “no retreat” order last week for all units serving in Donbas, requiring that Russian forces operating on the axis hold their positions regardless of the unfolding situation in front of them.[12] This order would be noteworthy in two ways if the report is accurate. First, Donetsk Oblast is the only area in Ukraine in which Russian forces are still attempting offensive operations. There have been sporadic reports of limited Ukrainian counterattacks, but no evidence that Ukraine is preparing a large-scale counteroffensive operation in this area.[13] The order suggests that the Russian military may fear a Ukrainian counteroffensive into the teeth of their last offensive efforts, however. Second, it shows deep mistrust of the combat capabilities of the units receiving the order in contrast with the apparently higher confidence Russian commanders have in the units in western Kherson Oblast, where sensible efforts to conduct a controlled withdrawal appear to prevail.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to be increasingly relying on irregular, poorly trained ad-hoc volunteer and proxy units rather than attempting to rebuild damaged or destroyed conventional Russian ground forces units.
- Ukrainian forces continue to consolidate positions on the east bank of the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast despite Russian efforts to contain them.
- Russian forces in western Kherson Oblast may be attempting to fall back to more defensible positions in a controlled withdrawal to avoid the chaotic retreat that characterized the collapse of Russian defenses in Kharkiv earlier in September.
- Russian forces suffered devastating losses of manpower and equipment in their fight for eastern Ukraine and especially during the Ukrainian Kharkiv counter-offensive. Multiple Russian armored and mechanized units have likely been effectively destroyed according to assessments released on September 18.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 17, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces continue to conduct meaningless offensive operations around Donetsk City and Bakhmut instead of focusing on defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives that continue to advance. Russian troops continue to attack Bakhmut and various villages near Donetsk City of emotional significance to pro-war residents of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) but little other importance. The Russians are apparently directing some of the very limited reserves available in Ukraine to these efforts rather than to the vulnerable Russian defensive lines hastily thrown up along the Oskil River in eastern Kharkiv Oblast. The Russians cannot hope to make gains around Bakhmut or Donetsk City on a large enough scale to derail Ukrainian counteroffensives and appear to be continuing an almost robotic effort to gain ground in Donetsk Oblast that seems increasingly divorced from the overall realities of the theater.

Russian failures to rush large-scale reinforcements to eastern Kharkiv and to Luhansk Oblasts leave most of Russian-occupied northeastern Ukraine highly vulnerable to continuing Ukrainian counter-offensives. The Russians may have decided not to defend this area, despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's repeated declarations that the purpose of the “special military operation” is to “liberate” Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Prioritizing the defense of Russian gains in southern Ukraine over holding northeastern Ukraine makes strategic sense since Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts are critical terrain for both Russia and Ukraine whereas the sparsely-populated agricultural areas in the northeast are much less so. But the continued Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut and Donetsk City, which are using some of Russia's very limited effective combat power at the expense of defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives, might indicate that Russian theater decision-making remains questionable.

Ukrainian forces appear to be expanding positions east of the Oskil River and north of the Siverskyi Donets River that could allow them to envelop Russian troops holding around Lyman. Further Ukrainian advances east along the north bank of the Siverskyi Donets River could make Russian positions around Lyman untenable and open the approaches to Lysychansk and ultimately Severodonetsk. The Russian defenders in Lyman still appear to consist in large part of

BARS (Russian Combat Army Reserve) reservists and the remnants of units badly damaged in the Kharkiv Oblast counteroffensive, and the Russians do not appear to be directing reinforcements from elsewhere in the theater to these areas.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continue to prioritize strategically meaningless offensive operations around Donetsk City and Bakhmut over defending against continued Ukrainian counter-offensive operations in Kharkiv Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces liberated a settlement southwest of Lyman and are likely continuing to expand their positions in the area.
- Ukrainian forces continued to conduct an interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct unsuccessful assaults around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Ukrainian sources reported extensive partisan attacks on Russian military assets and logistics in southern Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian officials continued to undertake crypto-mobilization measures to generate forces for war Russian war efforts.
- Russian authorities are working to place 125 “orphan” Ukrainian children from occupied Donetsk Oblast with Russian families.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 16

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Mason Clark, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 16, 8pm ET

The revelations of mass graves of civilians and torture chambers in newly liberated Izyum confirm ISW’s previous assessments that the Bucha atrocities were not isolated war crimes but rather a microcosm of Russian atrocities throughout Russian-occupied areas. The Ukrainian General Staff published images on September 16 showing a mass burial site in Izyum, Kharkiv Oblast and noting that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that the site contained more than 400 bodies showing signs of torture and brutality.<sup>[1]</sup> The Ukrainian Ministry of Reintegration reported that the number of war crimes victims in Izyum may exceed those of Bucha.<sup>[2]</sup> The head of Ukraine’s National Police, Ihor Klymenko, stated that Ukrainian officials have found 10 Russian torture chambers in Vovchansk, Kupyansk, Balaklia, and Izyum.<sup>[3]</sup> One torture chamber was reportedly located in the Balakliya police department, where “Russians wore masks and tortured civilians with bare electric wires,” according to Andriy Nebytov, the head of the National Police Main Directorate in the Kyiv region.<sup>[4]</sup>

ISW Non-Resident Fellow Nataliya Bugayova had warned in April 2022 that “Bucha is an observable microcosm of a deliberate Russian terror campaign against Ukrainians. Similar intentional atrocities are happening throughout Russian-occupied areas in Ukraine.”<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian officials will likely continue to find evidence of Russian war crimes and atrocities as Ukrainian forces liberate occupied areas.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared to threaten increased attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure if reported Ukrainian attacks on Russian military positions in Russian Federation territory continue.** Putin said that Russia has been “rather restrained in our response” to Ukrainian “terrorist acts [and] attempts to damage our civilian [sic] infrastructure” in a question-and-answer session with reporters following the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting on September 16. <sup>[6]</sup> He continued “more recently, the Russian armed forces have dealt a couple of sensitive blows” that are “warning shots,” and threatened that more serious attacks could follow. Putin did not explicitly refer to the reported Ukrainian strikes on the base of the Russian 3rd Motorized Rifle Division near Valuyki that occurred on September 16, nor did he make clear which Russian actions he was referring to. But Russian forces have increased attacks on civilian infrastructure throughout Ukraine over the past several weeks as Russian media personalities increase explicit calls for such attacks.<sup>[7]</sup>

Putin’s comments are likely in part a response to criticism by Russian milbloggers, who attacked the Kremlin for failing to protect Russian territory and for failing to respond adequately. One milblogger asked if the Kremlin still regards Belgorod Oblast as part of Russia, part of the “special military operation” zone, or part of Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> Another blamed the reported Ukrainian attack on Valuyki on the so-called “regrouping” of Russian forces (referring to the initial language the Russian Ministry of Defense used to describe the rout of Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast) and warned that another “regrouping” could allow Ukrainian forces to attack other critical Russian areas.<sup>[9]</sup> Putin has

increasingly shown a determination to appease the milbloggers and the constituencies they speak to and on behalf of, even at the expense of the uniformed Russian military and the Russian Ministry of Defense.

The Ukrainian Resistance Center warned on September 16 that Russian forces are planning to conduct false flag attacks against civilian population in Russian-occupied Ukraine and urged Ukrainians in occupied areas to avoid public places between September 17 and September 20. [10] The Resistance Center suggested that such false flag attacks could be attempts to "divert the attention of the world community from the defeat in Kharkiv and the discovery of Russian war crimes" in liberated areas.

**Correction:** ISW's 9/15/2022 update contained several errors. We mistakenly located the Kinburn Spit in Crimea rather than Kherson Oblast. We reported Ukrainian attacks northwest of Kharkiv City rather than Kherson City. And we reported Ukrainian operations continuing southwest of Izyum, near Lyman, instead of southeast of Izyum. We apologize for these errata, which have been corrected in the 9/15 update text.

#### Key Takeaways

- The discovery of mass graves and torture chambers in liberated Izyum confirm previous ISW assessments that the Bucha atrocities were emblematic of Russian activities in occupied areas rather than an anomaly.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin apparently threatened to expand Russia's attacks on civilian Ukrainian infrastructure if Ukraine continues reported attacks on military facilities in Russia.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center warned that Russian forces may conduct false flag attacks in occupied areas between September 17 and September 20.
- Ukrainian forces captured all of Kupyansk City on September 16, continuing offensive operations east of the Oskil River.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly shelled targets in Valuyki, Belgorod Oblast, Russia, overnight on September 15-16.
- Ukrainian forces struck Russia's occupation headquarters in Kherson, likely using HIMARS, and are continuing ground maneuvers in three areas of Kherson Oblast as part of the ongoing southern counteroffensive.
- Russian administrative officials are rallying around Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's call for "self-mobilization" at a local level to provide additional forces to the Russian military.
- Forced Russian mobilization campaigns are likely depleting male populations in parts of the claimed territory of the Russian proxy Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) along the front lines.
- Immediate and coordinated Russian information responses suggest that Ukrainian partisans may not be responsible for the September 16 assassination of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Prosecutor General and his deputy.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 15, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces are continuing counteroffensive operations in eastern Ukraine, increasingly pressuring Russian positions and logistics lines in eastern Kharkiv, northern Luhansk, and eastern Donetsk oblasts. Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing ground operations southwest of Izyum, near Lyman, and on the east bank of the Oskil River, reportedly compelling Russian forces to withdraw from some areas in eastern Ukraine and reinforce others. [1] Russian forces in eastern Ukraine will likely struggle to hold their defensive lines if Ukrainian forces continue to push farther east.

The Kremlin is responding to the defeat around Kharkiv Oblast by doubling down on crypto-mobilization rather than setting conditions for general mobilization. Chechen leader Ramzan

Kadyrov called on all federal subjects to initiate “self-mobilization” and not wait on the Kremlin to declare martial law.<sup>[2]</sup> Kadyrov claimed that each federal subject must prove its readiness to help Russia by recruiting at least 1,000 servicemen instead of delivering speeches and conducting fruitless public events. Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan echoed the need for Russians to volunteer to join the war effort, and several loyalist Russian governors publicly supported Kadyrov’s speech. [3] The Russian-appointed head of occupied Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, announced the formation of two volunteer battalions on the peninsula in support of Kadyrov’s calls.<sup>[4]</sup>

**The defeat around Kharkiv Oblast prompted the Kremlin to announce a Russia-wide recruitment campaign.** Kremlin officials and state media had not previously made country-wide recruitment calls but had instead tasked local officials and outlets to generate forces ostensibly on their own initiative. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov vaguely welcomed the creation of the battalions on July 12, while 47 loyalist federal subjects advertised and funded the regional volunteer battalion recruitment campaign.<sup>[5]</sup> A prominent Russian milblogger and a supporter of general mobilization praised officials such as Kadyrov for taking the recruitment campaign from the ineffective Russian Ministry of Defense; this recruitment revamp is likely to secure more support for the Kremlin among nationalist figures who are increasingly critical of the Russian MoD, even if the drive does not generate large numbers of combat-effective troops.<sup>[6]</sup>

**The Kremlin has likely abandoned its efforts to shield select federal subjects from recruitment drives, which may increase social tensions.** ISW has previously reported that the Kremlin attempted to shield Moscow City residents from reports of the formation of the Moscow-based “Sobyaninsky Polk” volunteer regiment.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian opposition outlet *The Insider* noted that several groups in the republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tyva, and Yakutia (Republic of Sakha) are publicly opposed to the Kremlin’s emphasis on recruitment on an ethnic basis.<sup>[8]</sup> Simonyan’s statement about “self-mobilization” prompted numerous negative comments among Russians calling on Russian oligarchs to pay for and fight in the war.<sup>[9]</sup>

**The Kremlin has almost certainly drained a large proportion of the forces originally stationed in Russian bases in former Soviet states since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February, likely weakening Russian influence in those states.** A Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) investigation reported on September 14 that the Russian military has already deployed approximately 1500 Russian personnel from Russia’s 201st Military Base in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, to Ukraine since the full-scale invasion began and plans to deploy 600 more personnel from facilities in Dushanbe and Bokhatar, a southern Tajik city, in the future.<sup>[10]</sup> RFE/RL additionally reported on September 13 that Russia has likely redeployed approximately 300 Tuvan troops from the Russian Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan to fight in Ukraine at varying points since late 2021.<sup>[11]</sup>

The withdrawals from the Central Asian states are noteworthy in the context of border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards exchanged fire in three separate incidents on September 14, killing at least two people.<sup>[12]</sup> The uptick in violence between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both of which are members of the Russian-controlled Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), comes alongside renewed aggression by Azerbaijan against CSTO member state Armenia. Russian forces also withdrew 800 personnel from Armenia early in the war to replenish losses in Ukraine, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[13]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin is responding to the defeat around Kharkiv Oblast by doubling down on crypto-mobilization, rather than setting conditions for general mobilization.
- The Kremlin has almost certainly drained a large proportion of the forces originally at Russian bases in former Soviet states since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February, likely weakening Russian influence in those states.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported Ukrainian ground attacks northwest of Kharkiv City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dniproproetrovsk Oblast border.
- Russian-appointed occupation officials and milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a landing at the Kinsburn Spit (a narrow peninsula of the Crimean Peninsula).
- Russian forces conducted limited ground assaults and are reinforcing positions on the Eastern Axis.
- The Russian proxy Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) is likely attempting to stop its administrators from fleeing ahead of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, demonstrating the bureaucratic fragility of the DNR.

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 14, 8:15pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is being established as the face of the Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine.** Prigozhin gave a recruitment speech on September 14 announcing that Russian prisoners have been participating in the war since July 1 when they were instrumental in seizing the Vuhlehirskaya Thermal Power Plant.<sup>[1]</sup> A Russian milblogger noted that Prigozhin is introducing a “Stalinist” method that allows the Kremlin to avoid ordering a general mobilization that could ignite social tensions in Russian society.<sup>[2]</sup> Milbloggers have been consistently praising Prigozhin’s success in Ukraine and some even said that he should replace the Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, whom milbloggers and Kremlin pundits blame for the Russian defeat around Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian military correspondent and milblogger Maksim Fomin (alias Vladlen Tatarsky) claimed to have spoken to Prigozhin about the situation on the Ukrainian-Russian border after the withdrawal of Russian forces in the area.<sup>[4]</sup> The Prigozhin-Fomin meeting, if it occurred, could indicate that the Kremlin is attempting to address milbloggers’ months-long complaints that the Russian Defense Ministry did not hear their criticism highlighting the ineffectiveness of Russian higher command. Prigozhin is Putin’s close confidant, and his developing relationship with milbloggers may help retain milblogger support for the Kremlin’s war effort while scapegoating Shoigu and the Russian Defense Ministry for the defeat around Kharkiv Oblast. ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin has changed its information approach to address the demands of the Russian milbloggers and nationalists’, suggesting that Putin seeks to win back the critical milblogger community alienated by Russian failures.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Russian forces likely targeted Ukrainian hydrotechnical infrastructure in western Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on September 14 to interfere with Ukrainian operations across the Inhulets River.** Ukrainian sources reported that eight Russian cruise missiles struck unspecified targets in Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, and caused extensive flooding in areas of Kryvyi Rih.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian sources identified the target location as the Karachun Dam, which sits along the Inhulets River on the western outskirts of Kryvyi Rih.<sup>[7]</sup> Footage of the aftermath of the strike shows a 2.5m increase in the water level of the Inhulets River, which runs south of Kryvyi Rih and is an important geographical feature for the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive along the Kherson-Mykolaiv border.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian forces likely targeted the Karachun Dam to damage Ukrainian pontoon bridges further downstream, especially in light of recent reports that Ukrainian troops are attempting to expand their bridgehead over the Inhulets River near Davydov Brid as part of the ongoing Kherson counteroffensive.<sup>[9]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is being established as the face of the Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine.
- Russian forces likely targeted Ukrainian hydrotechnical infrastructure in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast in order to interfere with Ukraine’s ability to operate across the Inhulets River
- The Ukrainian counteroffensive in eastern Kharkiv Oblast continues to degrade Russian forces and threaten Russian artillery and air defenses.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported Ukrainian ground attacks in northern Kherson Oblast, western Kherson Oblast, and northwest of Kherson City but did not report any major gains.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and northwest and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Funding volunteer battalions is likely placing financial strain on Russian cities and oblasts.
- Russian occupation authorities shut off mobile internet in occupied Luhansk Oblast on September 14, likely to preserve Russian operational security and better control the information environment as Russian forces, occupation officials, and collaborators flee newly-liberated Kharkiv Oblast for Russian and Russian-controlled territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

September 13, 10:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Kremlin acknowledged its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, the first time Moscow has openly recognized a defeat since the start of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.** Kremlin officials and state media propagandists are extensively discussing the reasons for the Russian defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, a marked change from their previous pattern of reporting on exaggerated or fabricated Russian successes with limited detail.<sup>[1]</sup> The Kremlin never admitted that Russia was defeated around Kyiv or, later, at Snake Island, framing the retreat from Kyiv as a decision to prioritize the "liberation" of Donbas and the withdrawal from Snake Island as a "gesture of goodwill."<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) originally offered a similar explanation for the Russian failure in Kharkiv, claiming that Russian forces were withdrawing troops from Kharkiv Oblast to regroup, but this false narrative faced quick and loud criticism online.<sup>[3]</sup> The Kremlin's acknowledgment of the defeat is part of an effort to mitigate and deflect criticism for such a devastating failure away from Russian President Vladimir Putin and onto the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the uniformed military command.

**Kremlin sources are now working to clear Putin of any responsibility for the defeat, instead blaming the loss of almost all of occupied Kharkiv Oblast on underinformed military advisors within Putin's circle.**<sup>[4]</sup> One member of the Kremlin's Council for Interethnic Relations, Bogdan Bezpalko, even stated that military officials who had failed to see the concentration of Ukrainian troops and equipment and disregarded Telegram channels that warned of the imminent Ukrainian counter-offensive in Kharkiv Oblast should have their heads "lying on Putin's desk."<sup>[5]</sup> ISW has previously reported that the Kremlin delayed Putin's meeting with Russian defense officials immediately after the withdrawal of troops from around Kharkiv, increasing the appearance of a rift between the Kremlin and the Russian MoD.<sup>[6]</sup> The Kremlin's admission of defeat in Kharkiv shows that Putin is willing and able to recognize and even accept a Russian defeat at least in some circumstances and focus on deflecting blame from himself.

**Several members of the Russian State Duma expressed concern about the dire situation on the frontlines in Ukraine during the Duma's first plenary meeting of its autumn session on September 13.** Leader of the Russian Communist Party Gennady Zyuganov stated that Russia needs to announce full mobilization because the Russian "special military operation" is a war.<sup>[7]</sup> Zyuganov said that one can end a "special military operation" at any time, but that a war can end only in victory or defeat, and "we have no right to lose" this war. Leader of the "Fair Russia—For Truth" Party Sergey Mironov called for social "mobilization," in which regular Russians would pay attention more to the war in Ukraine, rather than for full military mobilization. Leader of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party Leonid Slutsky also noted that Russia will continue to fight in the geopolitical "scrum" with the West. All three MPs had publicly advocated for Putin to recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) before the February invasion and were instrumental in setting information conditions for the invasion itself.<sup>[8]</sup> The MPs also discussed a December date for the next hearing on a bill that will simplify the delivery of the semiannual conscription notices.<sup>[9]</sup> The bill, which is likely to pass, will allow Russian military recruitment centers to send out conscription notices via mail instead of presenting them in person and will oblige men who have not received a notice in the mail to show up at the local recruitment center anyway.<sup>[10]</sup>

**The Kremlin is likely seeking to use the defeat in Kharkiv to facilitate crypto mobilization efforts.** Zyuganov's, Mironov's, and Slutsky's statements could be aimed at raising concern and patriotism among Russians to encourage them to get more involved in the war. The bill could further facilitate the ongoing crypto mobilization campaign, which aims to promote recruitment into contract service via deception, coercion, or promised financial rewards. Recruitment centers throughout Russia have been delivering unofficial summonses that look like conscription notices via mail and phone calls, but many men are aware that Russian law requires military recruitment centers to issue conscription notices in person.<sup>[11]</sup> Russian men who have responded to the unofficial summonses have recounted recruiters attempting to persuade or pressure them into signing a military contract. The bill legalizing mailed conscription notices will facilitate this dishonest practice. Both the bill and MPs' statements may evoke fear of general mobilization among men, which could incentivize some to sign military contracts and receive financial bonuses for volunteering, as opposed to being conscripted and forced to serve without such compensation.

**Nothing in the Duma bill suggests that Putin is preparing to order general mobilization, and it is far from clear that he could do so quickly.** Large-scale conscription would very likely overwhelm the Russian MoD's ability to induct, train, and equip new soldiers, particularly since the Russian

training base appears to be strained in preparing the limited numbers of volunteer battalions currently being fielded. Russia would likely first have to expand its training base significantly, a time-consuming process, and then find and prepare for combat sufficient equipment to kit out large numbers of new units before it could even begin to handle a large influx of new conscripts. Widely-reported Russian materiel shortages suggest deep failures in the Russian military industry that would make generating the necessary equipment, ammunition, and supplies for a large conscript army very difficult. ISW has not identified any indicators that preparations for such activities have been ordered or are underway.

**The Kremlin has adopted narratives that echo longstanding milblogger demands and complaints, suggesting that Putin seeks to appease and win back the critical milblogger community rather than censor it.** Russian milbloggers have long complained about the Russian MoD and the military high command, and now the Kremlin state media is openly expressing dissatisfaction with the progress of the war and the lack of situational awareness of events on the ground.[12] Milbloggers are advertising Telegram channels covering frontline developments 24/7 and urging readers to subscribe if they "believe" in Putin.[13] Kremlin-controlled and Kremlin-influenced media are now openly calling for an intensive missile campaign against Ukrainian civilian critical infrastructure and transit routes, an idea with broad support among many milbloggers.[14] These new calls are a stark departure from the Kremlin's previous line claiming that Russian forces did not target civilian infrastructure, and this new narrative is earning the Kremlin public support among milbloggers. Slutsky's statement at the Duma meeting pointing to the disinterest of most Russian civilians in the war echoes frequent milblogger complaints about the harmful side effects of conducting a limited war. [15]

**Russia's defeat in Kharkiv Oblast is causing panic among Russians in occupied Ukrainian territories, servicemen, and milbloggers.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) reported that Russian authorities in Crimea urged their families to flee to Russia, while employees of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) are selling their homes on the peninsula and are urgently evacuating their families due to Ukrainian counter-offensives.[16] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that forcibly mobilized proxy units are suffering low morale and psychological problems.[17] Russian milbloggers are increasingly worrying about Ukrainian counter-offensives in different areas along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblasts frontline, and preemptively identifying vulnerable Russian positions.[18]

**Russia's military failures in Ukraine are likely continuing to weaken Russia's leverage in the former Soviet Union.** Armenia accused Azerbaijan of violating a Russian-brokered ceasefire and attacking Armenian forces along the Azerbaijan-Armenian border on September 13.[19] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan held a call with Russian President Vladimir Putin and convened a meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states later in the day but did not invoke the CSTO's collective security agreement, according to government readouts of both meetings.[20] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not comment on whether the Kremlin would fulfill its CSTO obligations to Armenia if Azerbaijan continued to press its attack.[21] Russia's hedging approach may damage Russia's relationship with Armenia and with other CSTO member states, particularly if Russia cannot provide military or peacekeeping support.

The CSTO is a Russia-created and Russia-dominated intergovernmental military alliance that the Kremlin claims is about collective security, but typically uses to justify or further its hybrid war aims. The degraded Russian military likely does not have sufficient forces to enforce a ceasefire or to deploy additional peacekeepers to the area after six months of devastating war in Ukraine. ISW reported on March 13 that Russia pulled 800 personnel from Russia's base in Armenia and elements of its Nagorno-Karabakh "peacekeeping deployment" to replenish early losses in Ukraine.[22] ISW has observed no redeployments to Nagorno-Karabakh or Russia's base in Armenia since then.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin has recognized its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, the first defeat Russia has acknowledged in this war. The Kremlin is deflecting blame from Russian President Vladimir Putin and attributing it instead to his military advisors.
- The Kremlin is likely seeking to use the defeat in Kharkiv to facilitate crypto mobilization efforts by intensifying patriotic rhetoric and discussions about fuller mobilization while revisiting a Russian State Duma bill allowing the military to send call-ups for the regular semiannual conscription by mail. Nothing in the Duma bill suggests that Putin is preparing to order general mobilization, and it is far from clear that he could do so quickly in any case.
- The successful Ukrainian counter-offensive around Kharkiv Oblast is prompting Russian servicemen, occupation authorities, and milbloggers to panic.
- Russia's military failures in Ukraine are likely continuing to weaken Russia's leverage in the former Soviet Union as Russia appears unwilling to enforce a violated ceasefire it

- brokered between Armenia and Azerbaijan or to allow Armenia to invoke provisions of the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization in its defense.
- Ukrainian troops likely continued ground attacks along the Lyman-Yampil-Bilohorivka line in northern Donetsk Oblast and may be conducting limited ground attacks across the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast.
  - Russian and Ukrainian sources indicated that Ukrainian forces are continuing ground maneuvers in three areas of Kherson Oblast as part of the ongoing southern counter-offensive.
  - Russian troops made incremental gains south of Bakhmut and continued ground attacks throughout Donetsk Oblast.
  - Ukrainian forces provided the first visual evidence of Russian forces using an Iranian-made drone in Ukraine on September 13.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 12, 8:45pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukraine's southern counteroffensive is continuing to have significant impacts on Russian morale and military capabilities in southern Ukraine.** Satellite imagery of known Russian positions in Kyselivka, 15km northwest of Kherson City, shows that all but four Russian vehicles have departed from previous forward positions, consistent with rumors that Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) troops have abandoned Kyselivka and moved back towards the Dnipro River.<sup>[1]</sup> Kyselivka is an operationally significant location for Russian forces around Kherson City because it is the last major settlement along both the E58 highway and a railway line between current Ukrainian positions and Chornobaivka, the outermost part of Kherson City. The apparent withdrawal of Russian troops from this position may compromise the Russians' ability to defend the northwestern outskirts of Kherson City and suggests that Russian troops in this area perceive an imminent threat to their positions. Spokesperson for Ukraine's Southern Operational Command, Natalya Humenyuk, stated on September 12 that Russian forces located along the right bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast are attempting to negotiate for surrender under the auspices of international law.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian operations in Kharkiv Oblast are unlikely to have had such a dramatic psychological effect on Russian troops this far south, and both the withdrawal of troops from forward positions in Kyselivka and reports of surrender negotiations are indicators that Ukrainian counteroffensives in the south are progressing in a significant way, even if visibility on this axis is limited by the shift in focus to Kharkiv.

**The success of recent Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may be impacting the will or ability of the Russian military command to use newly formed volunteer units in Ukraine in a timely fashion.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Russian military command has suspended sending new, already-formed units to Ukraine due to recent Russian losses and widespread distrust of the Russian military command, factors which have caused a large number of volunteers to categorically refuse to participate in combat.<sup>[3]</sup> This assessment is still unconfirmed, but low morale due to Ukrainian counteroffensive success may prove devastating to the Kremlin's already-poor ability to generate meaningful combat capability. The deployment of these newly formed units to reinforce defensive lines against Ukrainian counteroffensives would be an operationally-sound decision on the part of Russian military leadership; and the delay or potential suspension of these deployments will afford Ukrainian troops time to consolidate and then resume the offensive, should they choose to do so, without having to face newly arrived and fresh (albeit undertrained and understrength) units.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces are continuing to make impactful gains in Kherson Oblast and are steadily degrading the morale and combat capabilities of Russian forces in this area.
- The Russian military command may be suspending the deployment of newly formed units to Ukraine due to recent Russian losses and overall degraded morale.
- Russian forces are failing to reinforce the new frontline following Ukrainian gains in eastern Kharkiv Oblast and are actively fleeing the area or redeploying to other axes.
- Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian military assets and positions in Kherson Oblast, likely steadily degrading them.

- The Ukrainian recapture of Izyum has likely degraded Russian forces' ability to conduct artillery strikes along the Izyum-Slovyansk highway.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced the restoration of the second reserve power transmission line to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Ukraine's sweeping counteroffensive is damaging Russian administrative capabilities and driving Russian departures from occupied parts of Ukraine far behind the line of contact.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 10**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark

September 10, 11:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast is routing Russian forces and collapsing Russia's northern Donbas axis.** Russian forces are not conducting a controlled withdrawal and are hurriedly fleeing southeastern Kharkiv Oblast to escape encirclement around Izyum. Russian forces have previously weakened the northern Donbas axis by redeploying units from this area to Southern Ukraine, complicating efforts to slow the Ukrainian advance or at minimum deploy a covering force for the retreat. Ukrainian gains are not confined to the Izyum area; Ukrainian forces reportedly captured Velikiy Burluk on September 10, which would place Ukrainian forces within 15 kilometers of the international border.<sup>[1]</sup> **Ukrainian forces have penetrated Russian lines to a depth of up to 70 kilometers in some places and captured over 3,000 square kilometers of territory in the past five days since September 6 – more territory than Russian forces have captured in all their operations since April.**

**Ukrainian forces will likely capture the city of Izyum itself in the next 48 hours if they have not already done so.** The liberation of Izyum would be the most significant Ukrainian military achievement since winning the Battle of Kyiv in March. It would eliminate the Russian advance in northwest Donetsk Oblast along the E40 highway that the Russian military sought to use to outflank Ukrainian positions along the Slovyansk – Kramatorsk line. A successful encirclement of Russian forces fleeing Izyum would result in the destruction or capture of significant Russian forces and exacerbate Russian manpower and morale issues. Russian war correspondents and milbloggers have also reported facing challenges when evacuating from Izyum, indicating Ukrainian forces are at least partially closing a cauldron in some areas.<sup>[2]</sup>

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the withdrawal of troops from the Balakliya-Izyum line on September 10, falsely framing the retreat as a “regrouping” of forces to support Russian efforts in the Donetsk Oblast direction – mirroring the Kremlin’s false explanation for the Russian withdrawal after the Battle of Kyiv.**<sup>[3]</sup> The Russian MoD did not acknowledge Ukrainian successes around Kharkiv Oblast as the primary factor for the Russian retreat, and claimed that Russian military command has been carrying out a controlled withdrawal from the Balakliya-Izyum area for the past three days. The Russian MoD falsely claimed that Russian forces undertook a number of demonstrative actions and used artillery and aviation to ensure the safety of withdrawing Russian forces. These Russian statements have no relation to the situation on the ground.

**The Russian MoD’s inability to admit Russian failures in Kharkiv Oblast and effectively set information conditions is collapsing the Russian information space.** Kremlin-sponsored TV propagandists offered a wide range of confused explanations for Ukrainian successes ranging from justifications that Russian forces are fighting against the entire Western Bloc, to downplaying the importance of Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCS) in Kupyansk.<sup>[4]</sup> The Kremlin’s propagandists appeared unusually disorganized in their narratives, with some confirming the liberation of certain towns and others refuting such reports. Guest experts also were unable to reaffirm the hosts’ narratives that Ukrainian successes are not significant for the Donbas axis. Such programming may reveal the true progress of the Russian “special military operation” to the general Russian public that relies on state media and the Russian MoD for updates.

**The withdrawal announcement further alienated the Russian milblogger and Russian nationalist communities that support the Kremlin’s grandiose vision for capturing the entirety of Ukraine.** Russian milbloggers condemned the Russian MoD for remaining quiet, choosing self-isolation, and distorting situational awareness in Russia.<sup>[5]</sup> One milblogger even stated that the

Russian MoD's silence is a betrayal of Russian servicemen that fought and still fight in Ukraine.[6] A Russian milblogger also noted that the Russian MoD has repeatedly ignored or demeaned the milblogger community that raised concerns with Russian military leadership and lack of transparency on the frontlines.[7] The milbloggers called on the Russian MoD to take the information space into its own hands and stop relying on silencing information.

Prior to the withdrawal announcement, the Russian MoD released footage of Russian military convoys reportedly moving to reinforce the Kharkiv direction on September 9.[8] Many Russian outlets and milbloggers expressed hope that these reinforcements would stabilize the frontline and repel Ukrainian advances on Izyum despite the Russian MoD failing to address the unfolding situation days prior. Russian milbloggers would have likely accepted MoD's announcement of a withdrawal like they previously did with the Russian retreat from the Snake Island and other tactical Russian losses if the Russian information space was not oversaturated with footage of Ukrainian successes. Such inconsistencies in messaging further support ISW's assessment that the Russian MoD faces challenges in responding to unexpected developments within the established informational framework, which portrays Russian invasion of Ukraine as an easy and faultless operation.[9] Most importantly, such unaware information practices erode the Russian public's trust in Russian MoD messaging and disrupt the Kremlin's propaganda facade.

**Russian milbloggers also criticized the Russian occupation authorities for failing to organize evacuation measures in Kharkiv Oblast.** Some milbloggers noted that occupation administrations are disoriented and lack initiative.[10] The Ukrainian counteroffensive is effectively paralyzing the Russian occupation leadership that is likely afraid for its fate.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces in Kharkiv Oblast are collapsing Russia's northern Donbas axis, and Ukrainian forces will likely recapture Izyum itself in the next 48 hours.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the withdrawal of troops from the Balakliya-Izyum line on September 10, and the Russian MoD's failure to set effective information conditions is collapsing the Russian information space.
- The withdrawal announcement and occupation authorities' failure to organize evacuation measures is further alienating the Russian milblogger and Russian nationalist communities that support the Kremlin's grandiose vision of capturing the entirety of Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces reached positions within 15–25km of the Russo-Ukrainian border in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast, Izyum's northern outskirts, and Lyman's south and southwestern outskirts, and captured the western half of Kupyansk.
- Russian forces are reinforcing frontline positions in Kherson Oblast while Ukrainian forces conduct positional battles and continue their interdiction campaign against Russian logistics lines.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground assaults north of Kharkiv City, south of Bakhmut, and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian recruitment drives are generating some criticism among Russian milbloggers and regions.
- Russian forces are reportedly intensifying filtration measures in Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts in response to Ukrainian counteroffensives on the Southern Axis.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 9

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

September 9, 11:15pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces have captured an estimated 2,500 square kilometers in Kharkiv Oblast in the Kharkiv area counteroffensive as of September 9.** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valery Zaluzhnyi stated on September 8 that Ukrainian forces liberated over 1,000 square kilometers between September 1–8 – a day before Ukrainian forces reached the southern approach to Kupyansk and the Oskil River on September 9.[1] Ukrainian forces are likely clearing pockets of disorganized Russian forces caught in the rapid Ukrainian advance to Kupyansk,

Izyum, and the Oskil River, given the influx of observed pictures of Russian prisoners of war in the past 48 hours.[2]

**Ukrainian forces may collapse Russian positions around Izyum if they sever Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) north and south of Izyum.** Ukrainian forces continued to advance on Kupyansk and towards Izyum on September 9, and are undertaking measures to isolate the Russian Izyum grouping of forces. If Ukrainians are successful in severing the Russian GLOCs, then they will have an opportunity to create a cauldron around Izyum and collapse a major portion of the Russian positions in northeastern Ukraine.

**The Kremlin is rushing resources to the Kharkiv City-Izyum line in an attempt to halt Ukrainian advances after Ukrainian forces achieved remarkable operational surprise.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Kremlin wires published footage of Russian military convoys reportedly en route to reinforce Kupyansk, Izyum, and the general Kharkiv direction but did not acknowledge Ukrainian successes in the area.[3] While Russian milbloggers largely welcomed the reports of reinforcements, some criticized the Kremlin for first relocating units away from the Kharkiv City-Izyum line, only to deploy them again to the same location.[4] Russian forces have been redeploying out of southern Kharkiv Oblast to reinforce Donetsk Oblast and the Southern Axis to address the threat of a Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast and to resume offensive operations west of Donetsk City for several weeks.[5] The successful Ukrainian counteroffensive is upending the Kremlin's effort to make Izyum an economy of force area. Some milbloggers also noted that September 10 will be a decisive day if Russians are unable to generate reserves and capable command in time.[6]

**The Kremlin is refusing to publicly address Ukrainian successes in Kharkiv Oblast, but the counteroffensive likely prompted Russian President Vladimir Putin to convene a meeting with top Russian security and political officials on September 9.**[7] The Kremlin did not discuss the topic of the security council meeting, and the Kremlin's Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that the Kremlin will not comment on the "situation around Balakliya and other events in the special operation zone." [8] Peskov directed all inquiries regarding the issue to the Russian MoD.

**Ukraine's counteroffensive operation in Kherson Oblast to degrade Russian forces on the Southern Axis is continuing simultaneously with Ukrainian operations on the Kharkiv City-Izyum line.** Ukrainian forces continue to target Russian pontoon and ferry crossings daily, indicating a long-term commitment to consistently destroying re-emerging Russian GLOCs. Ukrainian forces are maintaining a strict operational silence in southern Ukraine, which may appear as if Ukrainian forces are not advancing. Ukrainian forces are also likely operating in several directions in Kherson Oblast.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces have captured an estimated 2,500 square kilometers in Kharkiv Oblast in the Kharkiv counteroffensive as of September 9.
- The Kremlin is rushing resources to Kharkiv Oblast in response to effective Ukrainian operations.
- Ukrainian forces reached the outskirts of Kupyansk and are advancing on Izyum from the northwest, north, northeast, and southeast as of September 9 and will likely sever Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum within the coming days.
- Ukrainian forces may have advanced north of Hrushivka towards a Russian logistics hub in Velykyi Burluk, northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces are continuing counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine, including interdicting Russian GLOCs, and degrading Russian morale.
- Russian forces conducted ground assaults north of Kharkiv City and across the Eastern Axis.
- The United Nations released a report detailing poor Russian treatment of Ukrainian POWs and detained civilians.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 8**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

September 8, 11:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian successes on the Kharkiv City-Izyum line are creating fissures within the Russian information space and eroding confidence in Russian command to a degree not seen since a failed Russian river crossing in mid-May.** Ukrainian military officials announced that Ukrainian forces advanced 50km deep into Russian defensive positions north of Izyum on September 8, but the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) notably did not issue any statement regarding Ukrainian advances in Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian successes and the Russian MoD's silence prompted many Russian milbloggers to criticize and debate Russian failures to retain control over the city of Balakliya, approximately 44km northwest of Izyum. Some milbloggers claimed that Russian forces fully or partially withdrew from Balakliya in good order, while others complained that Ukrainian forces beat Russian forces out of the settlement.<sup>[2]</sup> Others noted that Rosgvardia units operating in the area did not coordinate their defenses or have sufficient artillery capabilities to prevent Ukrainian counterattacks in the region.<sup>[3]</sup> Milbloggers warned about an impending Ukrainian counteroffensive northwest of Izyum for days prior to Ukrainian advances, and some milbloggers noted that Russian command failed to prepare for "obvious and predictable" Ukrainian counteroffensives.<sup>[4]</sup> Others noted that Ukrainian forces have "completely outplayed" the Russian military command in Balakliya, while others encouraged readers to wait to discuss Russian losses and withhold criticism until Russian forces stabilize the frontlines.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The current tone and scale of Russian milblogger criticism echo the response to Russia's loss of a large amount of armor in a failed Russian river crossing in Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast, in May.**<sup>[6]</sup> ISW assessed at the time that the catastrophic Russian losses suffered due to incompetence shook the confidence of pro-Russian milbloggers, sparking criticism of the Russian war effort. Russian milbloggers and social media users accessed satellite imagery that showed devastating losses of Russian military equipment, which caused many to comment on the incompetence of the Russian military and analyze the scene on a tactical level. The Russian MoD did not comment on the situation, fueling burgeoning doubts about Russia's prospects in Ukraine.

**The Russian MoD repeated its Bilohorivka information mistake by failing to acknowledge the situation around Kharkiv Oblast and establish a desired narrative, leaving milbloggers to fill this gap with criticism of Russian forces.** The Russian MoD only claimed to have destroyed a Ukrainian ammunition depot in Balakliya.<sup>[7]</sup> Some milbloggers complained that the Russian MoD did not seize the information space in a timely manner to prevent the spread of Ukrainian social media on Russian Telegram channels, leading to distrust among Russian audiences.<sup>[8]</sup> Milbloggers largely supported the Russian MoD's narratives that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast had completely failed just days prior to Ukrainian breakthroughs in Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[9]</sup> Such a shift in milblogger perceptions of Russian progress in Ukraine can be partially attributed to the flaws in the Russian war-time information strategy, namely that:

1. The Russian MoD struggles to address unexpected Ukrainian operations because its information strategy relies on portraying the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an easy and faultless operation. This promotes a lack of situational awareness within the Kremlin and the Russian media space.
2. The Russian MoD needs a significant amount of time to develop and spread false narratives in the Russian information space. The Kremlin and Russian MoD successfully did so prior to the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south, and milbloggers largely followed the Kremlin's line. The Russian MoD failed to have a narrative ready for Ukrainian operations in Kharkiv Oblast.
3. Milbloggers will share and promote footage and imagery of fighting unfavorable to Russian forces that will dominate coverage in the Russian information space if the Russian MoD does not provide its own media.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian successes on the Kharkiv City-Izyum line are creating fissures within the Russian information space and eroding confidence in Russian command to a degree not seen since a failed Russian river crossing in mid-May.**
- **Ukrainian forces in the Kharkiv Oblast counteroffensives advanced to within 20 kilometers of Russia's key logistical node in Kupyansk on September 8.**
- **Ukrainian forces will likely capture Kupyansk in the next 72 hours, severely degrading but not completely severing Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum.**
- **Ukrainian forces are continuing to target Russian GLOCs, command-and-control points, and ammunition depots in Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian occupation authorities continue to intensify crackdowns and filtration measures to curb Ukrainian partisans and pro-Ukrainian saboteurs.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks across the Eastern Axis.**

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

September 7, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces in southeastern Kharkiv Oblast are likely exploiting Russian force reallocation to the Southern Axis to conduct an opportunistic yet highly effective counteroffensive northwest of Izyum.** Ukrainian forces likely used tactical surprise to advance at least 20km into Russian-held territory in eastern Kharkiv Oblast on September 7, recapturing approximately 400 square kilometers of ground. Russian sources claimed that Russian troops began deploying reinforcements to the area to defend against Ukrainian advances, and the Russian grouping in this area was likely understrength due to previous Russian deployments to support ongoing efforts to capture the remainder of Donetsk Oblast and support the southern axis.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukraine's ongoing operations in Kherson Oblast have forced Russian forces to shift their focus to the south, enabling Ukrainian forces to launch localized but highly effective counterattacks in the Izyum area.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian milbloggers voiced concern that this Ukrainian counterattack seeks to cut ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Russian rear areas in Kupyansk and Izyum, which would allow Ukrainian troops to isolate the Russian groupings in these areas and retake large swaths of territory.<sup>[3]</sup> These milbloggers used largely panicked and despondent tones, acknowledged significant Ukrainian gains, and claimed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south may be a distraction from the ongoing actions in Kharkiv Oblast, which they name as the main Ukrainian effort.<sup>[4]</sup> The level of shock and frank discussion of Ukrainian successes by Russian milbloggers speaks to the scale of surprise achieved by Ukrainian forces, which is likely successfully demoralizing Russian forces. While it is unlikely that the southern counteroffensive and effort to attrit Russian forces in southern Ukraine is a feint for renewed operations in Kharkiv Oblast, Ukrainian forces likely took prudent advantage of a reallocation of Russian troops, equipment, and overall operational focus to launch localized counteroffensives toward critical points in Kharkiv Oblast.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to deny the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) September 6 report on the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).** Putin claimed that there is no Russian military equipment on the grounds of the ZNPP other than Rosgvardia elements.<sup>[5]</sup> Rosgvardia elements have carried out both occupation functions and frontline combat operations during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Putin's admission that there are Rosgvardia elements on the plant's grounds further confirms that Russian forces have militarized their presence at the ZNPP despite constant Russian denials. Putin also accused the IAEA of acting under Western pressure to not directly blame Ukraine of shelling the plant. As ISW previously assessed, the IAEA report was a coded yet damning condemnation of Russian activities at the ZNPP.<sup>[6]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces are skillfully exploiting Russia's deployment of forces away from the Izyum-Kharkiv area to retake territory and threaten Russian GLOCs in the area, prompting demoralized responses from Russian milbloggers.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to deny the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) September 6 report on the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Ukrainian forces continued strikes on Russian logistics nodes, manpower and equipment concentrations, transportation networks, and command and control points in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported kinetic activity in northern Kherson Oblast and in western Kherson Oblast along the Kherson-Mykolaiv border.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks north of Kharkiv City, northwest of Slovyansk, northeast of Siversk, south and northeast of Bakhmut, and northwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces gained 400 square kilometers of territory northwest of Izyum on September 6-7 as part of an opportunistic and highly effective counteroffensive in southeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities announced November 4 as the potential date for annexation referenda in occupied areas of Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 6, 10:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) September 6 report on the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) described numerous ways in which Russian occupation authorities and the Russian military are jeopardizing the safe operation of the plant.[1]** The report does not attempt to determine which party is responsible for the shelling that has damaged the facility and repeatedly calls on "all relevant parties" to take measures to improve the situation. The moderation and apparent neutrality of that language can overshadow the extremely clear articulation of the Russian activities undermining the plant's safety and the fact that the report attributes no dangerous actions to Ukraine. **The IAEA's report is thus a coded condemnation of Russian moves that have created and are perpetuating the danger of nuclear disaster in Ukraine.**

The report specifically notes that Ukraine reported to the IAEA that Russian forces had positioned military equipment in two turbine halls and various other facilities in and around the ZNPP.[2] It adds that the inspection team that finally visited the plant recently directly observed Russian military equipment in turbine halls and elsewhere around the plant.[3] It added that personnel from Russia's state atomic energy organization, ROSATOM, were at the site and observed that "the presence of Rosatom senior technical staff could lead to interference with the normal lines of operational command or authority and create potential frictions when it comes to decision-making."[4] It also noted that "the operating staff did not have unrestricted access to some areas, such as the spray cooling ponds, roofs of the buildings, and structures in the area of the water intake, and that access to the cooling ponds area was required to be granted by the military personnel at the site."[5] The IAEA's inspection team was told that "the on-site emergency centre was not accessible to the plant staff for emergency response as it was occupied by the military authority." The team visited the alternative emergency center and observed that it lacked "an independent power supply or an independent ventilation system, and there is no internet connection to enable effective communication with all parties involved in an emergency response."[6]

The IAEA report thus demonstrates that Russian officials have placed military equipment in locations inhibiting access to essential facilities, installed their own personnel to oversee the plant's operations in ways that the IAEA judges could undermine effective response to a nuclear emergency, restricted the Ukrainian operating staff's access to key parts of the facility, and shifted the emergency center to a location lacking essential components vital to an effective response to a serious nuclear emergency. **The Russians have thus created conditions at the ZNPP that increase the risk that an emergency could occur and significantly increase the danger that the operating staff will be unable to respond efficiently and effectively in such an event.**

**Russian President Vladimir Putin could seek to use the fears that his actions are causing to coerce the IAEA and the international community into a de facto recognition of Russia's right to be involved in the operation of the ZNPP, which he might seek to portray as de facto recognition of Russia's occupation of southern Ukraine.** The somewhat coded language of the IAEA report reflects the fact that Ukraine remains the operator of the ZNPP and the party responsible for its safe operation and for complying with the IAEA under international law. The IAEA cannot directly engage Russia regarding the plant's operation without at least tacitly admitting that Russia has some right to be consulted. Putin might seek to take advantage of this situation to attempt to create a process analogous to the Minsk Accords that established the "ceasefire" in Ukraine following Russia's 2014 invasion. The Minsk and Minsk II agreements treated Russia as a neutral party rather than a participant, thereby tacitly accepting Putin's assertion that Ukraine was in civil war rather than the victim of Russian aggression. Putin might seek to use the conditions he has created at the ZNPP to establish a parallel international framework undermining Ukraine's sovereign rights over the much greater expanse of Ukrainian territory Russian forces now occupy.

**Ukrainian forces conducted a counterattack in Kharkiv Oblast near Balakliya that likely drove Russian forces back to the left bank (north side) of the Severskyi Donets and Serednya Balakliika rivers on September 6.** Ukrainian forces likely captured Verbivka (less than 3 km northwest of Balakliya) on September 6.[7] Geolocated footage posted on September 6 shows Ukrainian infantry in eastern Verbivka (less than 3 km from Balakliya). [8] Multiple Russian sources acknowledged Ukrainian gains in Verbivka and reported that Russian forces demolished unspecified bridges in Balakliya's eastern environs to prevent further Ukrainian advances.[9] Images posted on September 6 also show a destroyed Russian bridge over the Serednya Balakliika River—a geographic feature behind which the Russian front line in this sector likely lies.[10] Social media users reported that Russian forces withdrew from checkpoints six kilometers west of Balakliya on September 6.[11]

Russian forces likely no longer maintain their previous positions in Bairak and Nova Husarivka (just south of Balakliya on the right bank of the Seversky Donets River). Russian forces likely abandoned Bayrak and Nova Husarivka in late August. Images posted on August 30 show that Russian forces blew the bridge over the Seversky Donets River near Bayrak on an unspecified date.[12] Bridge demolition activity indicates a planned Russian withdrawal. Ukraine's General Staff reported on September 6 that Russian forces conducted air strikes against Bayrak, indicating that Ukrainian forces may have advanced in the area.[13]

**Russia's deployment of forces from Kharkiv and eastern Ukraine to Ukraine's south is likely enabling Ukrainian counterattacks of opportunity.** The September 6 Ukrainian counterattack in Kharkiv was likely an opportunistic effort enabled by the redeployment of Russian forces away from the area to reinforce Russian positions against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast. Obituary data on Russian servicemen indicates that Russia deployed elements of the 147th Artillery Regiment of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army to Kherson Oblast no earlier than late August.[14] This is the first time ISW has observed elements of Russia's elite 1st Guards Tank Army operating in southern Ukraine. Elements of the 147th previously fought in Bucha in Kyiv in March and elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army were active primarily along the Kharkiv Axis after the Russian withdrawal from Kyiv.[15]

#### Key Takeaways

- **The International Atomic Energy Agency report released on September 6 describes Russian activities that increase the likelihood of a nuclear accident at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant while decreasing the ability of the plant's personnel to respond to such an accident effectively.**
- **Ukrainian forces have launched likely opportunistic counterattacks in southern Kharkiv Oblast and retaken several settlements. Russian redeployments of forces from this area to defend against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson likely prompted and facilitated these counterattacks.**
- **Ukrainian forces are continuing an operational-level interdiction campaign and striking Russian logistics nodes, transportation assets, manpower and equipment concentrations, and control points across Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian sources discussed kinetic activity northwest of Kherson City and in western Kherson Oblast along the Inhulets River.**
- **Russian forces made incremental gains south of Bakhmut and continued ground attacks north, northwest, and southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian authorities continue setting conditions to Russify Ukrainians living in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory.**

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 5

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark

September 5, 10:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive is tangibly degrading Russian logistics and administrative capabilities in occupied southern Ukraine.** As ISW has previously reported, Ukrainian officials explicitly confirmed that Ukrainian troops seek to attrit Russian logistical

capabilities in the south through precision strikes on manpower and equipment concentrations, command centers, and logistics nodes.<sup>[1]</sup> These counteroffensive actions also have intentional radiating effects on Russian occupation authorities. The head of the Kherson Oblast occupation regime, Kirill Stremousov, told Russian media outlet *TASS* that his administration has paused annexation referendum plans in Kherson Oblast due to "security" concerns.<sup>[2]</sup> The Ukrainian Resistance Center similarly reported that Russian occupation authorities are abandoning plans for referenda due to the ongoing counteroffensive.<sup>[3]</sup> Shortly after *TASS* published his comment, Stremousov posted on Telegram denying he called for a pause because his administration had never set an official date for the referendum.<sup>[4]</sup> Both of Stremousov's statements indicate a high level of disorganization within occupation regimes that is likely being exacerbated by the effects of the counteroffensive. Ukrainian forces intend to slowly chip away at both Russian tactical and operational level capabilities in Kherson Oblast, and in doing so will likely have significant impacts on the administrative and bureaucratic capabilities of occupation officials.

**Putin publicly praised DNR and LNR forces (and denigrated the Russian military) on September 5, likely to motivate proxy recruitment and reframe Russian coverage of the war.** Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on September 5 that personnel in the 1st and 2nd Army Corps (the armed forces of the DNR and LNR) are fighting better in Donbas than professional Russian soldiers and insinuated that he is unhappy with the performance of the Russian Ministry of Defense.<sup>[5]</sup> Putin's comments are likely intended to promote recruitment and force generation in the DNR and LNR and refocus coverage of the war in the Russian media space away from the fighting in southern Ukraine. Russian forces have increasingly relied on DNR and LNR personnel as core fighting forces, and the Kremlin likely seeks to rhetorically elevate their role in the war to enhance recruitment and increase morale. Putin additionally likely seeks to elevate the Kremlin's preferred (and false) narrative of its invasion of Ukraine as an effort to "protect" the DNR and LNR by praising their forces.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **The Ukrainian counteroffensive is tangibly degrading Russian logistics and administrative capabilities in occupied southern Ukraine.**
- **Putin publicly praised DNR and LNR forces (and denigrated the Russian military) on September 5, likely to motivate proxy recruitment and reframe Russian coverage of the war.**
- **Ukrainian military officials maintained their operational silence regarding the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive but reported on the further destruction of Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Central Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian forces conducted ground attacks east of Siversk, northeast and south of Bakhmut, and along the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian special forces conducted a limited operation against a Russian FSB base in the Enerhodar area.**
- **Power unit No. 6 of the ZNPP became disconnected from the Ukrainian power grid.**
- **Russian authorities continue to seek unconventional sources of combat power and are increasingly turning to ill and infirm individuals.**
- **Occupation authorities set a 1.25 ruble/1 hryvnia exchange rate in Zaporizhia Oblast in order to facilitate the economic integration of occupied Zaporizhia into the Russian Federation.**

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 4**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, Frederick W. Kagan

September 4, 10:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive is making verifiable progress in the south and the east. Ukrainian forces are advancing along several axes in western Kherson Oblast and have secured territory across the Siverskyi Donets River in Donetsk Oblast. The pace of the counteroffensive will likely change dramatically from day to day as Ukrainian forces work to starve the Russians of necessary supplies, disrupt their command and control, and weaken their morale even as

counteroffensive ground assaults continue. The Russians will occasionally counterattack and regain some lost ground and will of course conduct likely fierce artillery and air attacks against liberated settlements and advancing Ukrainian troops. Ukrainian forces have made substantial enough progress to begin evoking more realistic commentary from the Russian milbloggers, who had been hewing very closely to the Kremlin's optimistic rhetoric until today.

**Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Ukrainian forces liberated two unnamed settlements in southern Ukraine and one settlement in Donetsk Oblast on September 4.**[1] Zelensky added that the Ukrainian 54th Mechanized Brigade also advanced in the direction Lysychansk-Siversk and established positions on unspecified heights. Ukrainian officials shared geolocated footage that shows Ukrainian forces raising a Ukrainian flag on a hospital building in Vysokopillya, south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast administrative border.[2] Social media sources confirmed that Ukrainian forces crossed the Siverskyi Donets River and liberated Ozerne, 20 km northwest of Siversk.[3]

**Geolocated footage from September 2-3 shows Russian forces firing MLRS rounds from positions on the grounds of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) within 1km of a nuclear reactor.**[4] Russian opposition outlet *The Insider*'s footage of Russian forces operating MLRS systems at the ZNPP reaffirms ISW's prior assessment that Russian forces have militarized the ZNPP. [5] The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced on September 3 that the ZNPP has been disconnected from the power grid for the second time in its operational history (the first instance occurred on August 25), likely due to continued Russian false flag attacks and other military activities in and around the ZNPP.[6] Russian sources claimed the ZNPP has stopped providing energy to Ukraine.[7]

**Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Russia is ready to negotiate Moscow's conditions for ending the Russian war in Ukraine on September 4, but the Kremlin is maintaining its maximalist goals to "denazify" Ukraine.** Peskov said that the Kremlin would discuss with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky how Ukraine would meet Russian conditions during peace negotiations and noted that Russia will complete all stated objectives of the "special military operation."<sup>[8]</sup> Peskov also noted that all conflicts end at the negotiations table and expressed that relations between Russia and the West will improve soon. Peskov's statement comes amidst the reports of the Ukrainian counteroffensive progress in southern Ukraine. The stated objectives of the "special military operation" include regime change in Kyiv as well as the surrender of all of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts to the Kremlin. Russian efforts to integrate occupied areas of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv Oblasts demonstrate that Moscow expects to keep those territories permanently as well. Peskov's statement is thus a reiteration of Moscow's demands for Ukrainian surrender and offers no indication that Moscow is willing to negotiate seriously and on the basis of a realistic assessment of its prospects in a war that is turning in Ukraine's direction.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Ukrainian forces liberated two unnamed settlements in southern Ukraine and one settlement in Donetsk Oblast. ISW has independently confirmed the liberation of the settlement in Donetsk Oblast and one of the settlements in Kherson Oblast.
- Geolocated footage shows Russian forces firing MLRS rounds from positions on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs), ammunition depots, and key positions to exhaust Russian forces and restrain Russian combat power.
- The Ukrainian liberation of Vysokopillya ignited critical discussions among some Russian milbloggers while the Russian Defense Ministry maintained that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct "unsuccessful attempts" to advance.
- Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) 127th Regiment of the 1st Army Corps personnel reportedly refused to fight due to a lack of supplies.
- Ukrainian forces regained territory on the left bank of the Siverskyi Donets River in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Bakhmut and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces are reportedly moving military assets to areas situated along major ground lines of communication (GLOCS) in rear areas in Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Mason Clark September 3, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian officials directly stated on September 3 that the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine is an intentionally methodical operation to degrade Russian forces and logistics, rather than one aimed at immediately recapturing large swathes of territory. Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Oleksiy Arestovych told the *Wall Street Journal* on September 3 that the current goal of Ukrainian forces in the south is the "systemic grinding of Putin's army and that Ukrainian troops are slowly and systematically uncovering and destroying Russia's operational logistical supply system with artillery and precision weapon strikes.<sup>[1]</sup> Arestovych's statement echoes ISW's assessment that the ongoing counteroffensive will likely not result in immediate gains and that Ukrainian forces seek to disrupt key logistics nodes that support Russian operations in the south and chip away at Russian military capabilities.<sup>[2]</sup>

**The Kremlin could intensify its efforts to promote self-censorship among Russian milbloggers and war correspondents who cover the war in Ukraine.** Russian authorities arrested and later released prominent Russian milblogger Semyon Pegov (employed by Telegram channel WarGonzo) in Moscow on September 2, due to what WarGonzo described as Pegov drunkenly threatening a hotel administrator.<sup>[3]</sup> Pegov is an experienced military journalist and WarGonzo has extensive links to the Russian military and access to Russian military operations in Donbas in 2014, Syria in 2015, and Ukraine in 2022.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW continues to track anomalous activity regarding Russia's milbloggers. We cannot confirm the circumstances of Pegov's arrest, but WarGonzo's explanation may be correct.

However, ISW previously assessed in July that the Kremlin seeks to promote self-censorship among milbloggers who have undermined Kremlin efforts to portray the war in Ukraine as a decisive Russian victory, and the Kremlin may seek to amplify this censorship. Russian military bloggers have candidly reported on Russian forces' poor performance in Ukraine and have discussed how the Kremlin has attempted to censor their coverage in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> Prominent milblogger Rybar noted that the relationship between the Russian military command and war correspondents particularly soured after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with war correspondents during the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on June 17, during which Putin likely tried to defuse milbloggers' discontent.<sup>[6]</sup> The Kremlin later likely intensified efforts to promote self-censorship among milbloggers by using a leaked letter from mothers of Russian soldiers who demanded the ban of journalist activity on the frontlines in July.<sup>[7]</sup>

The Kremlin so far has not escalated to detaining milbloggers for their coverage. Pegov's arrest—if connected to his coverage in Ukraine—would be a significant development in Russian efforts to control the Russian information space. ISW forecasted that the Russian information space would change significantly if the Ministry of Defense cracked down on milbloggers and stopped them from operational reporting since ISW uses milbloggers and Russian war correspondents as sources of Russian claims on a daily basis.<sup>[8]</sup> We will continue to observe and report on milblogger and war correspondent behavior and will flag significant changes in the Russian information space as we observe them.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian officials directly stated that the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive is a methodical operation to intentionally degrade Russian forces and logistics in the south, rather than one aimed at immediately recapturing large swathes of territory.
- The Kremlin may be intensifying efforts to foster self-censorship among Russian milbloggers and war correspondents who are covering the war in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces continued positional battles along the Kherson-Mykolaiv frontline and that Ukrainian troops are focusing on striking Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs), equipment and manpower concentrations, and logistics nodes along the Southern Axis.
- Social media footage shows evidence of effective Ukrainian strikes in western and central Kherson Oblast.
- Russian milbloggers continue to claim that Ukrainian forces are fighting in western Kherson Oblast, along the Inhulets River, and in northern Kherson south of the Dniproprovsk Oblast border.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut and north and southwest of Donetsk City.

- Ukrainian forces may be conducting localized attacks along the line of contact in Western Zaporizhia Oblast to disrupt ongoing Russian troop deployments.
- Russian authorities continue to generate combat power from recruitment through state-owned enterprises and prisons to circumvent general mobilization.
- Russian occupation authorities are increasingly struggling to provide basic services in occupied areas of Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Mason Clark

September 2, 9:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian independent polling organization Levada posted survey results on September 1 indicating that while the majority of Russians still support military operations in Ukraine, public support for the war may be gradually declining. Levada stated that the overall support for Russian forces in Ukraine has not changed significantly over the summer, with 76% of the survey's respondents in favor of the action of Russian forces in Ukraine (46% strongly supporting and 30% generally supporting).<sup>[1]</sup> Levada also noted that 48% of respondents believe that it is necessary for Russian operations in Ukraine to continue.<sup>[2]</sup> The polls showed that 44% of respondents were in favor of peace negotiations and that a majority of Russia's younger segments of the population (18-39-year-olds) favor negotiations.<sup>[3]</sup> In March of 2022, Levada found that 53% of respondents strongly support Russian military actions in Ukraine but that the percentage of respondents in this category declined to 46% by August.<sup>[4]</sup> This is a minor deterioration and will not fundamentally impair the Kremlin's ability to conduct the war. However, declining support and war weariness will likely increasingly impede Russian recruitment and force generation efforts.

**Russian and proxy officials are solidifying their narratives surrounding the Ukrainian counteroffensive to amplify false claims that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast is detrimental to Ukraine's continued existence.** Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed on September 2 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky planned the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast solely to create an illusion among "Western curators" that Ukrainian forces can conduct an effective counteroffensive.<sup>[5]</sup> Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Deputy Interior Minister Vitaly Kiselyov claimed that Ukrainian forces' engagement in the counteroffensive was (referring to the offensive in past tense) "collective suicide" and suffered high casualties.<sup>[6]</sup> Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko claimed on September 1 that internal Ukrainian divisions will soon force the military conflict to end.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian milbloggers increased their amplification of these narratives on September 1-2 as the information space around the success and tempo of the Ukrainian counteroffensive remained murky.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian sources will likely continue propagating these false information narratives to exploit Ukrainian operational silence. As ISW has previously noted, complex counteroffensives cannot be resolved overnight or in a matter of days, and the Russian presentation of an immediate Ukrainian failure due to a lack of constant Ukrainian claims of territorial gains is a deliberate obfuscation of reality.<sup>[9]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Independent polling showed that a majority of Russians still support the Russian war in Ukraine.
- Russian and proxy officials are solidifying their narratives surrounding the Ukrainian counteroffensive to claim it will debilitate the Ukrainian military.
- Ukrainian officials reported that positional battles are underway in unspecified areas of Kherson Oblast and that Ukrainian forces are continuing to strike Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs), logistics nodes, and reinforcement efforts throughout southern and central Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks south and northeast of Bakhmut and along the western and northern outskirts of Donetsk City.

- Russian forces continued targeting Ukrainian rear areas along GLOCs and may be reinforcing the Southern Axis by reallocating equipment from Russian rear areas in Donbas and Crimea.
- Ukrainian sources claim that Russia can pull an additional 300,000–350,000 military personnel from support units in Russia, Syria, Armenia, Tajikistan, Nagorno Karabakh, and Kazakhstan. These figures do not accurately represent the fact that support units placed into combat roles will not generate substantial combat power and are necessary for supporting combat, training, and other operations.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 1

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Mason Clark

September 1, 11pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated his false framing of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine as a defensive operation to protect Russia on September 1.** During a meeting with schoolchildren in Kaliningrad, Putin stated that the purpose of the "special military operation" is to eliminate the "anti-Russian enclave" that is forming in Ukraine and is an existential threat to the Russian state.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin similarly invoked the concept of an "anti-Russia" in his February 24 speech declaring a "special operation" in Ukraine.<sup>[2]</sup> Putin's reiteration of an "anti-Russian" entity that must be defeated militarily to defend Russia reaffirms his maximalist intentions for Ukraine and is likely intended to set the information conditions to call for further Russian efforts and force generation going into the fall and winter of this year.

**Russian milbloggers continued attempts to claim that Ukraine's counteroffensive in the south has already failed.** Igor Girkin, a Russian nationalist and former commander of militants in the 2014 fighting in Donbas, stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing to attack after the "failure of the first attack"—falsely portraying ongoing Ukrainian operations as separate attacks after an initial failure—and reiterated the common Russian narrative that what he claims are Ukraine's "Western handlers" pushed Ukraine to conduct a counteroffensive.<sup>[3]</sup> Girkin additionally stated that Ukraine's Western partners poorly planned for the counteroffensive, underestimated Russian capabilities and assumed Russians are incompetent, and principally accounted for political—not military—considerations.<sup>[4]</sup> One milblogger stated that Ukraine's defeat in the south will be the strongest psychological blow to Kyiv and that this failure will have a continued long-term psychological effect on Ukraine's morale.<sup>[5]</sup> The Russian milbloggers are increasingly centrally describing Ukrainian attacks as tactless and "suicidal" rushes.<sup>[6]</sup>

**As ISW has reported, military operations on the scale of the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive do not succeed or fail in a day or a week.**<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainians and the West should not fall for Russian information operations portraying the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast as having failed almost instantly or that depict Ukraine as a helpless puppet of Western masters for launching it at this time.

The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin has extended the deadline for Russian forces to capture Donetsk Oblast from August 31 to the still highly unlikely target date of September 15, and Russian forces are conducting several redeployments to meet this goal.<sup>[8]</sup> Deputy Chief of the Ukrainian Main Operational Department Oleksiy Gromov stated that Russian forces are regrouping elements of the Central Military District (CMD) operating in the Luhansk-Donetsk Oblast directions in an effort to increase the number of troops west of Donetsk City.<sup>[9]</sup> Gromov added that Russian forces deployed two battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the direction of the western Zaporizhia Oblast frontline from Belgorod Oblast, which he noted might support resumed Russian offensive operations in Donbas.<sup>[10]</sup> Gromov stated that Russian military officials are continuing to form the 3rd Army Corps to deploy to Donetsk Oblast, also likely to resume offensive operations in the Donetsk operational area.<sup>[11]</sup> Gromov noted that it is unclear if all mobilized 3rd Army Corps servicemen have undergone military training.<sup>[12]</sup> Russian forces also reportedly introduced one BTG each to the Sloviansk and Mykolaiv directions.<sup>[13]</sup> RFE/RL's footage also shows that Russian forces are continuing to react to the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast by consistently transferring military convoys to southern Ukrainian

via the Kerch Strait Bridge.[14] These Russian deployments are likely intended to set conditions for a revised operation to capture Donetsk Oblast, but Russian forces remain highly unlikely to make the progress necessary to capture the Oblast by September 15.

**The Kremlin is likely seeking to capitalize on the significance of seizing areas around Donetsk City that have been contested since 2014 to boost the morale of Russian and proxy forces.** Russian forces have not been successful in advancing toward Siversk or capturing the E40 highway to Slovyansk-Bakhmut since the fall of Lysychansk and are likely experiencing challenges incentivizing Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) elements to continue fighting to reach the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders.[15] Russian forces had minor territorial gains around Avdiivka, which generated positive chatter among the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) fighters in early August after which the advances stalled west of Donetsk City.[16]

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian logistical nodes and key positions throughout Kherson Oblast in support of the ongoing counteroffensive in southern Ukraine.
- Russian milbloggers reiterated claims that Ukrainian forces are fighting along four axes of advance in Western Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk, south and northeast of Bakhmut, and northwest and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian authorities escalated claims that Ukrainian forces are threatening both the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and the newly arrived International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delegation on the territory of the ZNPP.
- The Russian 3rd Army Corps is continuing to form for deployment to Donbas.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely increasingly recognizing their inability to successfully hold sham referenda in occupied areas of Ukraine due to Russian military failures and ongoing Ukrainian resistance in occupied territories.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 31

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 31, 10:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainians and the West should not fall for Russian information operations portraying the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast as having failed almost instantly or that depict Ukraine as a helpless puppet of Western masters for launching it at this time.** The Russian Ministry of Defense began conducting an information operation to present Ukraine's counteroffensive as decisively failed almost as soon as it was announced on August 29.[1] Several prominent military bloggers—even bloggers who have historically been critical of the Kremlin—are promoting this message.[2] Other milbloggers are additionally promoting the narrative that Ukraine's Western handlers pushed Ukraine to launch the counteroffensive prematurely and/or too late for "political" reasons and because the West expected a counteroffensive.[3] Kremlin media outlets have also centrally amplified allegations of civil-military conflict between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi to bolster the narrative that Zelensky sought to conduct a counteroffensive for inappropriate political reasons whereas Zaluzhnyi assessed Ukrainian forces were not militarily prepared to do so.[4]

**Military operations on the scale of this counteroffensive do not succeed or fail in a day or a week.** Ukrainian officials have long acknowledged that they do not have the sheer mass of mechanized forces that would have been needed to conduct a blitzkrieg-like drive to destroy the Russian defenses in Kherson Oblast or anywhere. They have instead been setting conditions for months by attacking and disrupting Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs), Russian command and control, and Russian logistics systems throughout southwestern occupied Ukraine. The timing of the start of the counteroffensive is consistent with the observed degradation of Russian capabilities in western Kherson Oblast balanced against the need to start liberating occupied Ukrainian lands and people as soon as possible. There is no reason to suspect that the timing has been materially influenced by inappropriate considerations or tensions. Counteroffensive operations

now underway will very likely unfold over the coming weeks and possibly months as Ukrainian forces take advantage of the conditions they have set to defeat particular sectors of the line they have identified as vulnerable while working to retake their cities and towns without destroying them in the process.

**Military forces that must conduct offensive operations without the numerical advantages normally required for success in such operations often rely on misdirections and feints to draw the defender away from the sectors of the line on which breakthrough and exploitation efforts will focus.** The art of such feints is two-fold. First, they must be conducted with sufficient force to be believable. Since they are feints, however, rather than deliberate attacks expected to succeed, they often look like failures—the attacking units will fall back when they feel they have persuaded the defender of their seriousness. Second, they take time to have an effect. When the purpose of the feint is to draw the defender's forces away from the intended breakthrough sectors, the attacker must wait until the defender has actually moved forces. There will thus likely be a delay between the initial feint operations and the start of decisive operations. The situation during that delay may well look like the attack has failed.

**The Ukrainian military and government are repeating requests to avoid any reporting or forecasting of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, a measure that is essential if the counteroffensive includes feints or misdirections.[5]** It is of course possible that the counteroffensive will fail, that any particular breakthrough attempt that fails was not a feint, or that the Ukrainian military has made some error in planning, timing, or execution that will undermine the success of its operations. But the situation in which Ukraine finds itself calls for a shrewd and nuanced counteroffensive operation with considerable misdirection and careful and controlled advances. It is far more likely in these very early days, therefore, that a successful counteroffensive would appear to be stalling or unsuccessful for some time before its success became manifest.

**ISW and other analysts studying this war have been appropriately cautious and circumspect in announcing the culmination or defeat of major Russian offensive operations. ISW will apply the same caution and circumspection to assessing the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and exhorts others to do the same.**

Russian authorities released a list of the locations of schools in occupied areas, including precise coordinates, ostensibly warning of possible Ukrainian attacks against them as the school year begins on September 1. This announcement could be preparation for Russian false-flag attacks on schools, for an explanation of very low attendance, or for some other purpose. The Russian Defense Ministry (MoD) issued a statement on August 31 warning that Ukrainian forces are preparing to shell schools in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts.<sup>[6]</sup> The Russian MoD released a list of the addresses and exact locations of all schools in occupied areas of Ukraine under the pretext of "ensuring the safety of students and teachers."<sup>[7]</sup> This statement, along with the list of schools in occupied areas, could be an attempt to set information conditions for three potential courses of action on September 1. The first, and most dangerous, may be a preparation for Russian troops to stage a false-flag attack against educational infrastructure in occupied areas of Ukraine and blame the Ukrainian armed forces for the attack. The second scenario, which is more likely, is that Russian authorities may be setting conditions to explain very low enrollment and attendance in Russian-run schools as the school year begins. As ISW reported on August 30, Ukrainian families with children have been increasingly leaving Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine as the school year approaches.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian authorities may seek to amplify the claimed threat of Ukrainian strikes against schools in order to explain low attendance levels. The third scenario is that Russian authorities could be attempting to establish a published no-strike list by identifying specific civilian infrastructure, which will later allow them to use the identified schools as military bases with the expectation that Ukrainian forces will not target designated civilian infrastructure.

**Russian authorities are additionally using the start of the new school year to escalate efforts to institutionalize the elimination of Ukrainian identity.** Russian authorities continued to disseminate Russian educational materials in schools in occupied areas of Ukraine. Russian-backed authorities from Sevastopol arrived in Starobilsk, Luhansk Oblast, to deliver backpacks and official state symbols of the Russian Federation to local schools.<sup>[9]</sup> The Russian-appointed head of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, similarly called on educators in Crimea to intensify patriotic programming in Crimean schools, notably to teach children about Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to conduct a "special military operation" in Ukraine.<sup>[10]</sup> Ukrainian outlet *Strana* reported that the first lesson that will be taught in schools in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts is oriented on a lesson outline that pulls from Putin's article on "The Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", his speeches on the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR), and the commencement of the "special military operation."<sup>[11]</sup> In these speeches, Putin rejected the legitimacy of Ukrainian

identity, declaring that it “is entirely the product of the Soviet era... shaped on the lands of historical Russia.”[12] He also repeatedly declared that Ukraine is part of Russia and cannot be a state in its own right. The explicit link between Russian-imposed curricula in Ukrainian schools and these speeches and writings is part of an effort to erase the Ukrainian identity in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine through educational control.[13]

The G7 Non-Proliferation Directors Group stated that Russian attempts to disconnect the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) would be “unacceptable,” ahead of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delegation’s visit to the plant.[14] The G7 Non-Proliferation Directors Group noted that the ZNPP should not be used for military activities or the storage of military material. Satellite imagery provided by Maxar previously showed Russian combat vehicles sheltering under the ZNPP infrastructure very close to a reactor vessel.[15]

**Russian and Ukrainian sources again exchanged accusations of shelling and loitering munition strikes on Enerhodar on August 31.** Kremlin-sponsored sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strike on the Enerhodar City Council building, and Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces shelled the building in an effort to frame Ukrainian forces ahead of the IAEA visit.[16]

#### Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense and Russian milbloggers began an information operation declaring the Ukrainian counteroffensive a failure almost as soon as it was launched. It is far too soon to assess the progress of the counteroffensive operation, however, which will likely be difficult to evaluate in the short term if it relies on feints and misdirection.
- Russian occupation authorities are imposing a curriculum on Ukrainian students aimed at eliminating the notion of Ukrainian national identity, explicitly in line with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s speeches and writings falsely claiming that Ukraine is part of Russia, and that the Ukrainian identity was an invention of the Soviet period.
- The G7 Non-Proliferation Directors Group condemned Russian attempts to disconnect the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant from the Ukrainian power grid as “unacceptable” ahead of the arrival of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delegation to the plant.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks south of Bakhmut and along the western outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian-appointed officials in Crimea began “reconstructing” air defense systems to counter smaller targets in response to recurring drone attacks on the peninsula. Russian officials are likely strengthening Crimean air defenses at the expense of other theaters.
- Zabaykalsky Krai announced the formation of the “Daursky” volunteer engineer-sapper battalion.
- Ukrainian partisans conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack against the headquarters of the “Together with Russia” political organization in Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast, where occupation authorities were reportedly preparing for sham referenda.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 30, 10:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces began striking Russian pontoon ferries across the Dnipro River on August 29, which is consistent with the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. The effects of destroying ferries will likely be more ephemeral than those of putting bridges out of commission, so attacking them makes sense in conjunction with active ground operations. Ukrainian military officials confirmed that Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian pontoon-ferry crossing in Lvove, approximately 16km west of Nova Kakhovka on the right bank of the Dnipro River on August 29.

[1] Ukrainian and Russian sources have also reported that Ukrainian forces struck a pontoon crossing constructed out of barges near the Antonivsky Road Bridge.[2]

**Ukrainian forces have long undertaken efforts to destroy Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) prior to the announcement of the counteroffensive operation, which likely indicates that Ukrainian forces are committed to a long-term effort - composed of both strikes and ground assaults.** Ukrainian strikes on Russian GLOCs disrupt the Russians' ability to supply and reinforce their positions with manpower and equipment, which will assist Ukrainian ground counteroffensives. Satellite imagery shows that Russian forces are continuing to use ferries to transfer a limited amount of military equipment daily via the Dnipro River.[3]

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive is thus a cohesive process that will require some time to correctly execute.** The Kremlin will likely exploit the lack of immediate victory over Kherson City or Ukrainian operational silence on the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive to misrepresent Ukrainian efforts as failing and to undermine public confidence in its prospects.

**Russian forces are continuing to react and adjust their positions throughout southern Ukraine, likely both as a response to the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive and in preparation for broader Ukrainian counter-offensives further east.** Russian forces are continuing to transfer large convoys of military equipment from Crimea and Melitopol.[4] Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov also noted that Russian forces have opened up around five military bases and barracks in Melitopol and will likely continue to prepare defenses around Melitopol given its strategically vital GLOCs between Rostov Oblast and southern Ukraine.[5] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces in Kherson Oblast are attempting to conduct rotations of troops, likely in an effort to reinforce some vulnerable positions.[6]

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive is likely driving Russian redeployment and reprioritization throughout the theater.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are reinforcing the grouping of forces operating west of Donetsk City area with elements of the Central Military District (CMD).[7] ISW has previously identified that CMD units, under the command of the CMD Commander Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, operated in the Lysychansk-Siversk area and recently concluded an operational pause in mid-August.[8] The movement of CMD units to Donetsk City area further suggests that Russian forces are deprioritizing the Siversk advance in favor of attempting to sustain momentum around the Donetsk City area. ISW has previously reported that Russian advances around Avdiivka and the western Donetsk City area have effectively culminated following Russian limited breakthroughs around the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft.[9] The redeployment suggests that the Russian command has recognized that it cannot pursue more than one offensive operation at a time.

The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces are deploying elements of the newly-formed 3rd Army Corps, which is at least in part composed of inexperienced volunteers, to reinforce neglected Russian positions in Kharkiv and Zaporizhia Oblasts.[10] The deployment of the 3rd Army Corps may indicate that Russian forces seek to recoup combat power for use in offensive operations around Donetsk City or defensive operations in Kherson by replacing experienced troops with raw and poorly trained volunteer units.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely setting conditions for the coerced cultural assimilation of displaced Ukrainians in Russia to erase their Ukrainian cultural identity.** Head of the Russian Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs, Igor Barinov, spoke about the creation of "adaptation centers" for "migrants" living in Russia with Putin on August 29. [11] Barinov stated that with Putin's permission and support, the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs is working on programs in unspecified pilot regions to ensure that "migrants" to Russia know and respect Russian traditions, customs, and laws to prevent "migrants" from experiencing "social isolation" in Russia.[12] Barinov claimed that there is a risk of ethnic minorities in Russia forming enclaves that will exacerbate ethnic crime within Russia, and that "adaptation centers" would be an effective tool in maintaining the stability of migrant communities.[13] Russian outlet *Vot Tak* amplified statements made by Russian migration expert Alexander Verkhovsky that such programs should structure themselves as something between refugee camps and vocational training centers for migrants.[14] Verkhovsky also noted that over 3.5 million displaced Ukrainians have entered Russia since the full-scale invasion began on February 24. [15] Many displaced Ukrainians in Russia are not in Russia voluntarily, and the Russian government has forcefully transferred at least 1,000 children from Mariupol to Russia.[16] The forcible transfer of children of one group to another "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" is a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[17]

The creation of so-called social adaptation programs in Russia would add a social dimension to the legal frameworks through which Putin likely seeks to forcibly culturally assimilate Ukrainians into the Russian Federation. As ISW previously reported on August 29, Putin signed two decrees on August 27 in a purported effort to assist stateless peoples and migrants from Ukraine to indefinitely live and work in the Russian Federation with certain social payments allocated to those who left Ukraine following

February 18.[18] Russian Security Council Chairman Dmitry Medvedev also stated that Russia will begin working on a bill in September for the condition of entry, exit, and stay in Russia for foreigners. [19] Putin's decrees and the bill alluded to by Medvedev are likely meant to set conditions for migrants from Ukraine to remain in Russia permanently, thus essentially forming the backbone of an extended campaign to at population transfer between Ukraine and Russia with the purpose of Russifying Ukraine. Programs at so-called adaptation centers would likely serve as a form of cultural reprogramming to erase Ukrainian cultural identity from displaced Ukrainian who either fled to Russia or were deported by Russian authorities.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations with ground assaults and strikes against Russian GLOCs across the Dnipro River. Ukrainian forces made gains on the ground and have begun striking pontoon ferries across the river.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely setting legal and social conditions for the coerced cultural assimilation of displaced Ukrainians in Russia to erase their Ukrainian cultural identity.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Izyum, south of Bakhmut, and near the western outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in northern Kherson Oblast.
- An anonymous senior US military official stated that the US believes that Russia is firing artillery from positions around and in the vicinity of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing efforts to forcibly-integrate schools in occupied Ukraine into the Russian educational system and extending methods of social control.
- Russian forces are continuing to move military equipment into Crimea.
- Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing to recruit and deploy volunteer battalions.
- Russian occupation authorities are taking measures to forcibly-integrate Ukrainian schools into the Russian education space in preparation for the approaching school year.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 29, 10:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian military officials announced the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast on August 29.** Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces have broken through the first line of defenses in unspecified areas of Kherson Oblast and are seeking to take advantage of the disruption of Russian ground lines of communication caused by Ukrainian HIMARS strikes over many weeks.[1] Ukrainian officials did not confirm liberating any settlements, but some Russian milbloggers and unnamed sources speaking with Western outlets stated that Ukrainian forces liberated several settlements west and northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Ihulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border.[2] The Russian Defense Ministry (MoD), Russian proxies, and some Russian milbloggers denounced the Ukrainian announcement of the counteroffensive as "propaganda."<sup>[3]</sup>

**Many Russian milbloggers nevertheless reported a wide variety of Ukrainian attacks along the entire line of contact, and the information space will likely become confused for a time due to panic among Russian sources.**<sup>[4]</sup> Russian outlets have also vaguely mentioned evacuations of civilians from Kherson Oblast, but then noted that occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast are calling on residents to seek shelter rather than flee.<sup>[5]</sup> ISW will report on the Ukrainian counteroffensive in a new section below.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi announced that the IAEA mission to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) left for the plant on

**August 29.** Grossi specified that he is leading the mission but neither he nor the IAEA specified a timeline for the investigation.[6]

**Russian sources continue to make claims likely intended to manipulate public opinion and the IAEA investigation.** Several Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces shelled Enerhodar and shared photos allegedly showing the location where Ukrainian forces struck a nuclear fuel storage site on the territory of the ZNPP on August 29.[7] Ukrainian sources reported continued Russian shelling of Enerhodar near the ZNPP.[8] Russian sources claimed on August 29 that Ukrainian forces fired on the Khmelnytsky Nuclear Power Plant deep in western Ukraine and far from the front lines; Ukrainian authorities denied these claims.[9] Russian authorities also alleged that several IAEA members from the current mission will remain at ZNPP permanently, but ISW cannot confirm these reports at this time.[10]

**Satellite imagery from August 29 provided by Maxar Technologies shows Russian combat vehicles apparently sheltering under ZNPP infrastructure very close to a reactor vessel.**

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian military officials announced that Ukrainian forces began a counteroffensive operation in Kherson Oblast on August 29.
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi announced that the IAEA mission to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant left for the plant.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground assaults north of Slovyansk, southeast of Siversk, south of Bakhmut, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued efforts to advance around Donetsk City.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground assault in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects continued efforts to form new battalions, attract new recruits, and coerce conscripts into signing military contracts.
- Ukrainian partisan activity continues to threaten Russian occupation authorities' control in occupied territories.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 28**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 28, 8:30 ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed two decrees on August 27 in a reported effort to assist stateless peoples and residents of Donbas and Ukraine live and work in the Russian Federation. The first decree allows Donbas residents, Ukrainians, and stateless peoples to live and work in Russia indefinitely.[1] The decree also allows Ukrainian and Donbas residents to work in Russia without a permit so long as they have acquired an identification card within 30 days of the August 27 decree.[2] The order also requires that all Donbas and Ukrainian residents arriving to Russia undergo mandatory fingerprint registration and a medical examination for the use of drugs, psychotropic substances, infectious diseases, and HIV.[3]

The second decree orders Russian social services to provide social payments to individuals forced to leave Ukraine and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR and LNR) for Russia after February 18, 2022.[4] The decree mandates that social services provide monthly pension payments of 10,000 rubles (approximately \$167) to all affected peoples, pension payments of 3,000 rubles (approximately \$50) to those with disabilities or those over the age of 80, and payments of 5,000 rubles (approximately \$83) to World War II veterans.[5] The decree also orders that social services pay pregnant women 10,000 rubles during pregnancy and an additional 20,000 rubles (approximately \$332) when the child is born.[6] The decree excludes refugees and specifies that Russian Federal Republics must execute the payments to the parties.[7]

**Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to trade claims of shelling at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, including at the Tenth Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of**

**Nuclear Weapons.**[8] Russia blocked a proposal aimed at strengthening the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons on August 27 in objection to a clause concerning Ukrainian control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.[9] The Ukrainian Mission to the United Nations published a statement signed by a large proportion of NPT signatories at the last meeting of the conference that condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine, nuclear rhetoric, and provocative statements as “inconsistent with the recent P5 Leaders Joint Statement on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races.”[10]

**Russia has further begun to implement strategies similar to those used by Iran in attempt to manipulate and possibly delay an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) mission to the plant in the near future.** The *New York Times* reported on August 27 that the IAEA had assembled a mission consisting of IAEA Chief Rafael Mariano Grossi and 13 experts from “mostly neutral countries” to visit Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant for observation next week.[11] The list notably excludes the United States and the United Kingdom, which Russia views as unfairly biased. The IAEA stated that the IAEA remained in active consultations for an upcoming mission.[12] Ukrainian official sources have reported that Russian special forces are torturing Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant employees to prevent them from disclosing safety violations to IAEA inspectors, that Russian authorities are attempting to limit the presence of Ukrainian employees at the plant, and that occupation authorities have begun collecting signatures from Enerhodar residents demanding an end to Ukrainian shelling to present to inspectors.[13] Manipulation of the nationality of inspectors and attacks on the “fairness” of IAEA inspections are tactics that Iran has long used to obfuscate its obstruction of IAEA inspections.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin issued two decrees in a reported effort to assist stateless peoples and residents of Donbas and Ukraine live and work in the Russian Federation.**
- **Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations northwest of Slovyansk.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southeast of Bakhmut and west and southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack north of Kharkiv City.**
- **Russian forces did not conduct any reported offensive operations in Kherson or Zaporizhzhia Oblasts.**
- **The Kremlin likely directed a media outlet closely affiliated with Moscow to criticize the Governor of St. Petersburg Alexander Beglov for failing to incentivize recruitment to volunteer battalions within the city.**
- **Russian occupation authorities continued efforts to facilitate the integration of the education system in occupied territories in Ukraine according to Russian standards.**

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 28**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. KaganAugust 27, 7:30ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The volunteer battalions constituting Russia’s 3rd Army Corps will likely deploy to Ukraine in ad hoc combined arms units to renew offensive operations, possibly on the Donetsk City axis and the Southern Axis. The volunteer battalions Russia has been forming have been divided into two general groups, as ISW has previously reported. Some battalions are deploying to the front lines as soon as they have completed their abbreviated initial training. Others have been coalescing into a new 3rd Army Corps.[1] An analysis by Janes Intelligence Group of new images from combat training for elements of the 3rd Army Corps at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod found 3rd Army Corps troops training with more modern Russian equipment such as BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, T-80BVM and T-90M tanks, and the latest AK-12 assault rifle variants.[2] The other Russian volunteer battalions that have fought in Ukraine, such as the North Ossetian “Alania” Battalion, have entered combat with older equipment. The fact that the 3rd Army Corps units are training on better gear and apparently being held back to deploy in more coherent combined arms groups suggests that the Russian military intends to commit them to offensive operations and hopes to regain momentum somewhere along the front line. Elements of the 3rd Army Corps are reportedly already deploying from Nizhny Novgorod closer towards Russia’s border with Ukraine. The Georgia-based Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) observed T-80BV and T-90M tanks that were in Mulino likely of the 3rd Army Corps deploy to Rostov Oblast on August 27.[3] If this report is correct, it could suggest that the Russian military intends to commit the 3rd Army Corps to reinforce offensive operations near Donetsk City, where drives around Mariinka, Pisky, and Avdiivka have been stalling after making some gains. Elements of the 3rd Army Corps may also

deploy to the Southern Axis. A Russian Local media outlet reported that the Khabarovsk Krai “Baron Korf” signals battalion will support the deployment of Russian field posts in Kherson Oblast and provide command and control to the new Russian 3rd Army Corps, indicating the Kremlin will likely deploy 3rd Army Corps elements to Kherson and Ukraine’s south.[\[4\]](#)**3rd Army Corps elements are unlikely to generate effective combat power, however.** Better equipment does not necessarily make more effective forces when the personnel are not well-trained or disciplined, as many members of the 3rd Army Corps’ volunteer units are not. Previous military experience is not required for many of 3rd Army Corps’ volunteer elements.[\[5\]](#) Images of the 3rd Army Corp elements have shown the volunteers to be physically unfit and old.[\[6\]](#) Analysts have also noted that Russia’s lack of experienced non-commissioned officers (NCOs) will hurt the 3rd Army Corps effectiveness.[\[7\]](#) ISW has previously commented on reports of indiscipline among the personnel of the 3rd Army Corps as well.

[\[8\]](#)**Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command stated that a 10-person Russian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempted assault operations in Kherson Oblast on August 27, suggesting that Russian offensive capabilities in Kherson Oblast have degraded even further.** [\[9\]](#) A 10-person group amounts to a squad, which is too small to act effectively as a maneuver unit. If the Southern Operational Command correctly reported the size and mission of this unit, it would indicate that Russian ground forces in Ukraine have degraded to the point that they are attempting to conduct offensive operations and echelons too low to make meaningful gains. ISW has no independent confirmation of the current size of Russian assault echelons attempting ground attacks in Ukraine, but this report is consistent with the Ukrainian campaign to degrade Russian logistics capabilities in western Kherson Oblast and ISW’s prior assessments of diminished Russian military morale in Ukraine.[\[10\]](#)**Key Takeaways**

- **Volunteer battalions that comprise Russia’s 3rd Army Corps are likely being prepared to attempt offensive combined arms operations but will likely lack sufficient combat power to make a material difference on the battlefield.**
- **Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command stated that a 10-person Russian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempted assault operations in Kherson Oblast, indicating that Russian offensive capabilities in Kherson Oblast have degraded further.**
- **Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack north of Kharkiv City.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Izum, northeast of Siversk, northeast and south of Bakhmut, and west and southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian forces targeted Russian airborne command-and-control elements in western Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian sources traded accusations of shelling the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.**
- **Russian military leadership may be shifting to a new phase of mobilization in central Russia and have likely exhausted pools of potential recruits in more peripheral and disenfranchised regions.**
- **Russian authorities are intensifying law enforcement operations in occupied areas.**

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Mason Clark

August 26, 6:45pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces did not make any claimed or assessed territorial gains in Ukraine on August 26, 2022, for the first time since August 18, 2022.[\[1\]](#) However, Russian forces still conducted limited and unsuccessful ground attacks on the Eastern Axis on August 18.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated that unspecified actors (but almost certainly Russian forces) reconnected part of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to the Ukrainian power grid on August 26.[\[2\]](#) Ukrainian nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom stated that unspecified actors reconnected one of the power units to the ZNPP and are working to add capacity to the ZNPP’s operations.[\[3\]](#) Russian forces remain in full control of the plant, though it is unclear why they would have reconnected the power unit.

Russian occupation authorities remain unlikely to successfully conduct sham referenda to annex Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation by early September, despite reports of advancing preparations for referenda. Spokesperson for Ukraine’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky stated on August 26 that Russian authorities have completed administrative preparations for referenda and created election headquarters, drawn up voter lists, and created election commissions, which Skibitsky stated indicates that the preparatory process for referenda is “almost complete.”[\[4\]](#) Russian-backed occupation authorities in Zaporizhzhia Oblast announced that they have already audited polling stations, analyzed voter lists, and selected candidates for work in voter precincts and territorial election commissions.[\[5\]](#)

However, Russian occupation authorities are unlikely to be able to carry out referenda as they intend (with cooperation from local collaborators) by the purported September 11 deadline due to continued frictions within occupation administrations and ongoing partisan attacks. The Ukrainian advisor to the head of Kherson Oblast, Serhiy Khlan, stated on August 26 that the Kherson occupation administration is struggling to find people to head administrative units in charge of referendum preparations, likely due to a lack of willing locals and low levels of trust in Ukrainian collaborators.<sup>[6]</sup> Khlan notably stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin may have ordered occupation administrators to avoid importing Russian administrators to fill these roles in order to make the referendum process appear like a grassroots initiative with local support.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainian sources have previously reported that Ukrainian resistance and increasing partisan attacks are inhibiting preparations for the referendum.<sup>[8]</sup> While Russian authorities could hypothetically forcibly annex Ukrainian territories on an arbitrary date, they are unlikely to do so without holding staged referenda. All observed indicators suggest that Russian authorities seek to create a veneer of local support and participation before conducting the referenda to frame them as widely supported initiatives but face ongoing setbacks that will delay any annexation effort.

#### Key Takeaways

- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated that elements of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) reconnected to the Ukrainian power grid on August 26.
- Russian occupation authorities remain unlikely to successfully conduct sham referenda to annex Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation by early September, despite reports of advancing preparations for referenda.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Izyum, northeast and south of Bakhmut, and on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCS) and military infrastructure in Kherson Oblast which support operations on the west bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian federal subjects (regions) continued additional recruitment drives for volunteer battalions, which continue to deploy to Ukraine.
- Ukrainian partisans and internal division continue to pose threats to Russian control of occupied territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 25, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's August 25 decree to increase the size of the Russian military starting in January 2023 is unlikely to generate significant combat power in the near future and indicates that Putin is unlikely to order a mass mobilization soon.** The decree increases the nominal end strength of the Russian Armed Forces by 137,000 military personnel, from 1,013,628 to 1,150,628, starting on January 1, 2023. [1] The Russian military likely seeks to recover losses from its invasion of Ukraine and generate forces to sustain its operation in Ukraine. The announcement of a relatively modest (yet likely still unattainable) increased end strength target strongly suggests that Putin remains determined to avoid full mobilization. The Kremlin is unlikely to generate sufficient forces to reach an end strength of over 1,150,000 soldiers as the decree stipulates. The Russian military has not historically met its end-strength targets. It had only about 850,000 active-duty military personnel in 2022 before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, for example, well shy of its nominal end strength target of over one million.<sup>[2]</sup>

Russia would likely face serious obstacles to adding large numbers of new soldiers quickly. Apart from the challenges Russian recruiters face, Russia's net training capacity has likely decreased since February 24, since the Kremlin deployed training elements to participate in combat in Ukraine and these training elements reportedly took causalities.<sup>[3]</sup> Russia may use the fall conscription cycle in October 2022, which should bring in about 130,000 men, to replenish Russian losses, which reportedly number in the tens of thousands killed and seriously wounded. The Kremlin may alternatively use the additional end strength to formally subsume into the Russian military the forces of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics

and/or the new Russian volunteer units that are not formally part of the Russian military. The net addition to Russia's combat power in any such case would be very small.

**The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) disconnected from the power grid for the first time in its operational history on August 25.** Ukrainian nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom reported that Russian shelling caused the disconnection by starting fires at ash pits near the Zaporizhia Thermal Power Plant (ZTPP), approximately 5km from the ZNPP. [4] Energoatom stated that the ZTPP is currently supplying the ZNPP with power and that work is ongoing to reconnect one of the ZNPP power units back to the Ukrainian power grid. [5]

Russian sources accused Ukrainian forces of firing at the ZNPP, but Russia has not provided clear evidence of Ukrainian troops striking the plant.[6] As ISW has previously reported, Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that Russian troops deliberately conducted mortar strikes against the ash pits at the ZTPP.[7] The GUR also has not provided clear evidence to support its claims. The Russians' failure to provide unequivocal evidence of the extensive shelling they accuse Ukraine of conducting is more noteworthy, however, because Russia controls the ground and could provide more conclusive evidence far more easily than Ukraine could. The GUR also reported on August 20 that Russian officials had indefinitely extended the order for Ukrainian employees of the ZNPP to stay home, and there have been no reports of any rescission of that order, which means that a portion of the ZNPP's workforce is apparently still absent on Russian orders despite the ongoing emergency.[8] Russian forces have also heavily militarized the ZNPP since its capture, despite the fact that the facility is far from the front line and at no risk of imminent Ukrainian ground attack. This pattern of activity continues to make it far more likely that Russian forces have been responsible for kinetic attacks on and around the ZNPP than that Ukrainian forces have been.

#### Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest and northeast of Sloviansk, northeast and south of Bakhmut, and northwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in northwestern Kharkiv Oblast.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in northwestern Kherson Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian military assets and ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing recruitment efforts for volunteer battalions, which are continuing to deploy to training grounds in Russia and to Ukraine.**
- **Russian occupation administrators are continuing to take measures to mitigate challenges to their authority and facilitate the economic and educational integration of occupied territories into the Russian system.**

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 24, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stated on August 24 that Russian forces are slowing down the overall pace of their offensive operations in Ukraine while reaffirming that Russia's objectives in the war have not changed. At a meeting with defense ministers from member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Shoigu stated that Russian troops will be slowing down the pace of offensive operations in Ukraine in a conscious effort to minimize civilian casualties.[1] Shoigu also reiterated that operations in Ukraine are going according to plan and that Russian forces will accomplish all their objectives, supporting ISW's assessment that Russia's maximalist strategic war aims in Ukraine have not changed.[2] The Russian MoD has previously issued similar statements to account for the pace of operations in Ukraine.[3]

Shoigu's statement may also represent an attempt by the Russian MoD to set information conditions to explain and excuse the negligible gains Russian forces have made in Ukraine in the last six weeks. Since Russian forces resumed offensive operations following a pause on July 16 Russian forces have gained about 450.84 km<sup>2</sup> (roughly 174 square miles) of new territory, an area around the size of Andorra. Russian forces have lost roughly 45,000 km<sup>2</sup> of territory since March 21 (the estimated date of Russian forces' deepest advance into Ukraine), an area larger than Denmark. As ISW has previously assessed, Russian forces are unable to translate limited tactical gains into wider operational successes, and their offensive operations in eastern Ukraine are culminating. Shoigu's statement is likely an attempt to explain away these failings.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces have lost an area larger than Denmark since the high-water mark of their invasion of Ukraine in mid-March and gained an area the size of Andorra (one percent of what they have lost) in the last 39 days.**
- **Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu reaffirmed that Russia has not changed its maximalist strategic war aims.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest and southeast of Izyum, northeast, and south of Bakhmut, and west and southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in northwestern Kherson Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian military assets and ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts.**
- **Russian occupation authorities continue to face partisan and internal challenges to the administration of occupation agendas.**
- **Russian proxy leadership is continuing efforts to oversee the legislative and administrative integration of occupied territories into Russian systems.**

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 23**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 23, 8:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian government sources confirmed that Russia is bringing Ukrainian children to Russia and having Russian families adopt them. Russian federal subject (region) Krasnodar Krai's Family and Childhood Administration posted about a program under which Russian authorities transferred over 1,000 children from Mariupol to Tyumen, Irkutsk, Kemerov, and Altay Krai where Russian families have adopted them.<sup>[1]</sup> The Administration stated that over 300 children are still waiting to "meet their new families" and that citizens who decide to adopt these children will be provided with a one-time bonus by the state.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) additionally reported that Russian officials transferred 30 Ukrainian children from Khartsyzk, Ilovaysk, and Zuhres in occupied Donetsk Oblast to Nizhny Novgorod under the guise of having the children participate in youth educational-training programs.<sup>[3]</sup> The forcible transfer of children of one group to another "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" is a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Russian authorities are deploying security forces to Luhansk Oblast likely in response to waning support for the war and growing unwillingness to fight among Luhansk residents.** The LNR Internal Ministry reported on August 23 that LNR Internal Ministry personnel conducted joint patrols with consolidated police detachments from the Internal Ministries of St. Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast in Starobilsk, Shchastya, and Stanystia, occupied Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[5]</sup> The LNR Internal Ministry also reported on August 22 that Rosgvardia (Russian national guard) units conducted security for Russian Flag Day celebrations in Starobilsk.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Rosgvardia elements in Dovzhansk (formerly Sverdlovsk), Luhansk Oblast are not subordinate to the local LNR forces and that Rosgvardia conducted a search of an LNR official in Dovzhansk.<sup>[7]</sup> The deployment of Russian security forces to police-occupied areas of Luhansk Oblast supports ISW's previous assessment that LNR residents and possibly militia forces may be unwilling to continue fighting now that they have reached the Luhansk Oblast borders.<sup>[8]</sup> Recent intensified

Russian efforts to forcibly mobilize residents in Luhansk likely exacerbated this disillusionment, and Russian authorities may be increasing Russian security forces' presence in Luhansk to suppress any internal instability and/or because they are losing confidence in indigenous Luhansk forces.[9]

**Russian authorities' deployment of Rosgvardia elements to security duties in occupied Luhansk Oblast diverts these forces from operations elsewhere in Ukraine, likely contributing to the broader Russian failure to translate limited tactical gains into operational successes.** ISW previously assessed that Russian forces had likely exhausted their momentum from territorial gains around Avdiivka and Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast – a very small section of the whole Ukrainian theater – partially due to their inability to allocate sufficient resources to offensive operations. [10] LNR forces' unwillingness to fight in the war, coupled with Rosgvardia forces' presence in the rear instead of near the front will likely contribute to continued Russian failures to make significant territorial gains.

**Russian officials may have conducted a false flag event in Donetsk City on August 23 to justify attacks against Ukrainian government buildings on August 24, Ukrainian Independence Day.** Social media networks in Donetsk City reported that a strike caused damage to the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) administrative building, where DNR Head Denis Pushilin works.[11] Pushilin was reportedly absent at the time of the strike. Russian media framed the attack as a direct Ukrainian strike on a DNR government building, potentially to set information conditions for retaliatory strikes against Ukrainian government buildings on Ukrainian Independence Day.[12] Ukrainian government authorities previously warned government workers in Kyiv to work from home the week of August 22 to 26 and cited concerns that Russian forces will target Ukrainian government assets as part of an extended missile and artillery campaign on Independence Day.[13] Russian-backed head of Kherson's occupation administration Kirill Stremousov also claimed on August 22 that his administration was preparing for Ukrainian provocations on Independence Day, which could have been conditions-setting for a false-flag attack.[14]

**Unverifiable sources reported that axis commanders in Ukraine are reporting directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin, bypassing both the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov in the chain of command.** Independent Russian outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* or *iStories* quoted unnamed sources within the Russian General Staff stating that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu has lost Putin's trust after the initial phase of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine that failed despite Shoigu's assurances of a swift victory.[15] The sources claimed that Putin now bypasses Shoigu and interacts directly with Commander of Central Military District Alexander Lapin who oversees the "central" group of forces in Ukraine, and the Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces Sergey Surovikin who commands the "southern" group of forces. ISW cannot independently verify the validity of this report, but if the report is true, it indicates that Putin is also bypassing Gerasimov.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian government sources confirmed that Russian authorities are bringing Ukrainian children to Russia and having Russian families adopt them. The forcible transfer of children from one group to another "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" is a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.
- Russian authorities are deploying security forces to Luhansk Oblast likely in response to waning support for the war and growing unwillingness to fight among Luhansk residents. This deployment diverts these forces from operations elsewhere in Ukraine, likely contributing to the broader Russian failure to translate limited tactical gains into operational successes.
- Russian officials may have conducted a false flag event in Donetsk City to justify attacks against Ukrainian government buildings on Ukrainian Independence Day.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut, on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces made limited gains east of Mykolaiv City and in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian military assets and ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing to increase one-time enlistment bonuses for recruits, and are likely recruiting personnel with no prior military experience for specialist positions.
- Ukrainian partisan activity continues to disrupt Russian occupation activities.

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 22, 6:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian occupation officials in Zaporizhia Oblast have obliquely declared the region's independence from Ukraine by falsely identifying Ukrainian citizens entering the occupied region as temporary asylum seekers.** Head of the Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration Yevheny Balitsky signed an order that designates Ukrainian citizens arriving in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast as temporary asylum seekers based on Russian law.<sup>[1]</sup> The order requires the registration of Ukrainian and Russian citizens based on their place of residence or place of arrival in the Russian-occupied parts of Zaporizhia Oblast and requires the distribution of temporary identification forms for all "stateless persons." Ukrainians and Russians may register if they present proof of their temporary asylum application. This decree has various implications under both international law and domestic Russian law. International law states that a refugee is an individual from outside the country (or who is stateless) who is seeking "temporary asylum" in another country to escape persecution.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian law defines a refugee as a person "who is outside of his/her country of nationality or habitual residence."<sup>[3]</sup> Neither of these statuses properly apply to the majority of people crossing from unoccupied Ukraine into occupied Zaporizhia.

**Russian occupation authorities are thus falsely classifying all Ukrainians entering occupied territories in Zaporizhia Oblast as refugees escaping persecution in Ukraine.** The order also de facto identifies Ukraine as a separate country from the Zaporizhia Oblast entity, as defined by the occupation authority. By classifying all Ukrainians as refugees, Russian occupation authorities are establishing a new legal category that might have its own restrictions. Russian occupation authorities may use the refugee status to restrict Ukrainians who temporarily return to occupied territories after evacuating from them. The order will likely affect Ukrainian citizens traveling to occupied Kherson Oblast via the checkpoint in Vasylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, as the order requires the registration of individuals at the point of arrival in the occupied Zaporizhia Oblast, and Vasylivka is the checkpoint serving Kherson as well as Zaporizhia Oblasts.

#### Key Takeaways

- **Russian-backed occupation authorities in Zaporizhia Oblast have obliquely declared the independence of the occupied areas of the oblast by falsely identifying Ukrainian citizens entering from unoccupied Ukraine as temporary asylum seekers.**
- **Russian forces conducted localized spoiling attacks southwest and southeast of Izyum.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks southeast of Siversk and northeast and south of Bakhmut.**
- **Russian forces continued attempts to advance from the northern and western outskirts of Donetsk City and conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian forces made marginal gains along the Mykolaiv-Kherson line.**
- **Ukrainian intelligence stated that the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) will start "general mobilization" processes on September 1.**
- **Prymorsky Krai announced the formation of a new repair and service volunteer battalion.**
- **Ukrainian partisans continued to conduct attacks against Russian forces in occupied Melitopol.**

#### [Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 21](#)

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 20, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces' momentum from territorial gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka in late July is likely exhausted, and Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine are likely culminating although very small Russian advances will likely continue.** Russian forces seized Novoluhanske and the Vuhlehirksa Thermal Power Plant (TPP) southeast of Bakhmut on July 25 and 26, respectively, consolidating Russian control around difficult water features after many weeks of fighting. Russian sources celebrated these gains as a significant military victory without noting that Ukrainian military Ukrainian forces successfully broke contact and withdrew from the area.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces also celebrated the capture of Ukrainian fortifications around the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft southwest of Avdiivka, after Ukrainian forces withdrew from the area on July 30.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces capitalized on these gains to a limited extent and have been attacking toward Bakhmut from the northeast and southeast, and around Avdiivka, but these attacks are now stalling. Russian forces have not made significant territorial gains around Bakhmut or Avdiivka since their advances through Novoluhanske, the power plant, the Butivka Coal Mine, and a few small settlements near those areas.

**Russian forces' failure to capitalize on prior gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka is an example of a more fundamental Russian military problem—the demonstrated inability to translate tactical gains into operational successes.** Russian forces have consistently failed to take advantage of tactical breakthroughs to maneuver into Ukrainian rear areas or unhinge significant parts of the Ukrainian defensive lines. They therefore continually give the Ukrainians time to disengage tactically and re-establish defensible positions against which the Russians must then launch new deliberate attacks. This phenomenon helps explain the extremely slow rate of Russian advances in the east and strongly suggests that the Russians will be unable to take much more ground in the coming months unless the situation develops in unforeseen ways. Russian forces will likely remain unable to commit enough resources to any one offensive operation to regain the momentum necessary for significant territorial advances that translate to operational successes. Russian forces will also need to generate and commit additional assault groups, equipment, and morale to resume even these limited territorial advances yielding small tactical gains.

**Russian forces likely face issues repairing combat aircraft due to Western sanctions and may be attempting to bypass these sanctions by leveraging Belarusian connections with less severe sanctions.** The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that the Russian and Belarusian Defense Ministries signed “urgent” contracts on August 20 to repair and restore Russian military aviation equipment on Belarusian territory reportedly for further use in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Western sanctions against Russia have largely banned the transfer of equipment to the state of Russia as a whole, while sanctions against Belarus largely target individual Belarusian entities.<sup>[4]</sup> Western countries have previously sanctioned Belarusian industrial-military complex entities producing radar systems, automobiles, and repairing tracked vehicles, but it is unclear to what extent the sanctions impacted Belarusian import of aviation repair parts.<sup>[5]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces transferred some unspecified air defense equipment to Belarus from Russia on August 21. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces will close certain sections of Russian airspace in the Lipetsk, Voronezh, and Belgorod Oblasts from August 22-25.<sup>[6]</sup> The Russian-Belarusian agreement may suggest that Russian officials are attempting to circumvent sanctions on Russia, as it may be easier to import repair parts to Belarus than to Russia.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine have likely exhausted the limited momentum they gained at the end of July and are likely culminating. The Russian military has shown a continual inability to translate small tactical gains into operational successes, a failing that will likely prevent Russia from making significant territorial advances in the coming months barring major changes on the battlefield.
- Ukrainian military intelligence reports that Russia and Belarus have reached an “urgent” agreement for Belarus to repair damaged Russian aviation equipment for re-use in Ukraine. This agreement could be part of a Russian effort to use the looser sanctions regime on Belarus to circumvent sectoral sanctions on Russia.
- Russian forces attempted several unsuccessful ground assaults southwest and southeast of Izyum.
- Russian forces launched a ground attack southeast of Siversk and northeast and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces made limited gains west of Donetsk City but did not conduct any ground assaults on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border.
- Russian forces attempted unsuccessful ground assaults southwest of Donetsk City and continued attacking settlements northwest and southwest of Avdiivka.

- Russian forces conducted several assaults on the Kherson-Mykolaiv frontline and made partial advances east of Mykolaiv City.
- Russian forces are likely not training new recruits in discipline, creating an entitled force engaging in disorderly conduct in Russia and illegal conduct in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities intensified filtration measures and abductions in occupied territories ahead of Ukraine's Independence Day on August 24.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 20, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian occupation officials in Crimea reported another drone attack on the Russian Black Sea Fleet Headquarters in Sevastopol on August 20. Russian-appointed Governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhaev claimed that Russian forces were unable to shoot down a drone, resulting in the drone hitting the roof of the Black Sea Fleet headquarters.[1] Razvozhaev then retracted his initial statement and claimed that a fleet air defense post shot down the drone, which landed on the roof and caught fire.[2] Social media footage showed a loud explosion and a cloud of smoke around the headquarters, and the drone likely detonated rather than being shot down. Some OSINT accounts have identified the drone as a commercially-available "Skyeye 5000mm Pro UAV." [3] Ukrainian officials did not claim responsibility for the attack as of the time of this publication. ISW has previously reported that Crimean occupation officials have obliquely accused Ukraine of orchestrating a drone attack on the headquarters on July 31 during Russia's Navy Day.[4]

Russian occupation officials in Crimea are likely considering strengthening security on the peninsula following the attacks on Russian military infrastructure, and such measures may draw Russian security forces away from the front lines. Razvozhaev stated that all security services in Sevastopol are operating in "high alert" mode and controlling all entrances to the city. [5] Razvozhaev claimed that Sevastopol residents are asking the occupation administration to increase patrols in the city and establish new checkpoints, returning the peninsula to a security posture such as it had after Russia initially seized it in 2014. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have been using all types of security forces, including Rosgvardia, as combat forces and will likely need to divert some of these forces from the front lines and from occupation security duties elsewhere to defend occupied Crimea.[6] Russia's continued failures to stop attacks against occupied Crimea may also spark public discontent within Russian society. One Russian milblogger criticized Russian forces for not using more electronic warfare (EW) equipment following the first drone attack on July 31.[7] Social media footage already shows many Russians waiting in traffic jams to leave Crimea and go to Russia, which may indicate growing public concern for the effectiveness of Russian security measures.[8]

### Key Takeaways

- Russian occupation officials in Crimea reported another drone attack on the Russian Black Sea Fleet Headquarters in Sevastopol and are likely considering strengthening security on the peninsula.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful assaults across the Eastern Axis.
- Russian forces attempted limited, failed assaults north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces failed to advance after several assaults northwest of Kherson City and east of Mykolaiv City.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian ammunition depots and positions in Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts.
- Russian and proxy forces are continuing mobilization efforts, including forced mobilization in occupied territories and advertising campaigns.
- Russian occupation authorities continued coercive measures to force civilian cooperation with the occupation administrations.
- Conditions in occupied territories continued to deteriorate, indicating ineffective governance.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 19, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian military and transportation infrastructure in Crimea and Kherson Oblast are likely reducing Russian confidence in the security of Russian rear areas.** Reports from August 18 about Ukrainian strikes are affecting the Russian information space despite the fact that these reports were likely overblown. Available open-source evidence indicates that Ukrainian forces did not conduct a successful kinetic attack against either the Stary Oskol Air Base in Belgorod or Belbek Air Base in Crimea on August 18. Geolocated footage shows that a fire started at a field just south of the Stary Oskol Airfield (rather than at the airfield itself), and satellite imagery shows Russian forces transporting ammunition and military equipment to a forest close to the field.<sup>[1]</sup> An unspecified Russian Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official reiterated that Russian air defenses near the Kerch Strait Bridge activated against a Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) rather than an incoming strike.<sup>[2]</sup> There is no visual evidence of damage to either air base of as August 19. Geolocated footage shows no explosions or evidence of kinetic activity near the Belbek Air Base overnight on August 18-19, lending credence to claims that footage reportedly showing the explosion is recycled footage misattributed to the Belbek Air Base.<sup>[3]</sup> As ISW reported on August 18, Russian sources largely reported on and disseminated these false or exaggerated reports, indicating broader Russian panic.<sup>[4]</sup>

Russian authorities are visibly increasing security measures in Crimea, indicating growing worry among Russian authorities and civilians about the threat of Ukrainian strikes on rear areas previously believed to be secure. Russian authorities installed checkpoints to search Ukrainian cars and identify saboteurs in Sevastopol.<sup>[5]</sup> Certain Russian milbloggers made dramatic, pessimistic assessments that Ukrainian forces used strikes on the Kerch Strait Bridge and Belbek Air Base to conduct reconnaissance on Russian air and missile defense readiness and make assessments for new attacks, particularly the feasibility of a large strike.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications (UA StratCom) reported on August 19 that Russian forces are not in control of the situation in Crimea as evidenced by the blocking of the Kerch Strait Bridge and activation of air alarms in Sevastopol for the first time since the start of the invasion.<sup>[7]</sup> UA StratCom warned that Ukrainian forces have not yet struck the Kerch Strait Bridge with full capabilities and that prior Ukrainian strikes on the bridge demonstrate that the bridge is not as safe as the Russians previously believed.<sup>[8]</sup>

**The situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) remained largely unchanged on August 19, despite the Russian Ministry of Defense's August 18 claims that Ukrainian forces would stage a provocation at the ZNPP on August 19.** Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces shelled the ZNPP at night on August 18-19 but did not claim that Ukrainian forces launched a large-scale attack on the facility, contrary to Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) statements on August 18.<sup>[9]</sup> Zaporizhia Oblast Head Oleksandr Starukh emphasized on August 19 that the situation at the ZNPP remains tense but under control.<sup>[10]</sup>

**Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russian authorities are likely preparing to hold show trials for Ukrainian soldiers in Mariupol around August 24, notably coinciding with Ukraine's Independence Day.**<sup>[11]</sup> The GUR warned that Russian authorities intend to hold a show trial of captured fighters from the Azovstal Steel Plant in the Mariupol Philharmonic Theatre and may use the theatre to stage a false-flag attack on August 24.<sup>[12]</sup> Mariupol Mayor Advisor Petro Andryushchenko confirmed that the Mariupol occupation administration canceled rehearsal schedules at the theatre in order to accommodate the show trials, which ISW previously reported on August 11.<sup>[13]</sup> As ISW previously reported, these show trials will likely be orchestrated in order to create the impression for Russian domestic audiences that Russian occupation authorities are taking necessary steps to secure occupied areas as well as attempt to demoralize Ukrainian troops.<sup>[14]</sup> Russian authorities are likely orienting the trials around Ukraine's Independence Day in order to set further information conditions to exert law enforcement control of occupied areas.

#### Key Takeaways

- Recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian military and transport infrastructure in Crimea and Kherson Oblast are likely reducing Russian confidence in the security of Russian rear areas.

- The situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) remained relatively unchanged on August 19 despite Russian claims that Ukrainian forces would stage a provocation at the plant.
- Russian authorities are likely preparing show trials of Ukrainian defenders of Azovstal on Ukraine's Independence Day in order to further consolidate occupational control of occupied areas of Ukraine and set conditions to demoralize Ukrainian troops.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks north of Kharkiv City, southwest and southeast of Izyum, east of Siversk, and south and east of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted multiple unsuccessful ground assaults on settlements on the Southern Axis.
- Russia continues to generate regional volunteer units and will likely deploy many of them to Kherson and Ukraine's south as part of the 3rd Army Corps.
- Russian occupation authorities are strengthening their control of educational infrastructure in occupied areas in preparation for the approaching school year and may be sending Ukrainian children to Russia as part of a broader repopulation campaign.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 18, 7pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**There were no claimed or assessed Russian territorial gains in Ukraine on August 18, 2022 for the first time since July 6, 2022.[1]** Russian and Ukrainian sources did not claim any new territorial gains on August 18. However, Russian forces still conducted limited and unsuccessful ground assaults across the eastern axis on August 18.

**Russian sources reported explosions across Crimea—possibly caused by Russian air defenses, Ukrainian reconnaissance, or a Ukrainian attack—the night of August 18.** Three local sources told *Reuters* that at least four explosions struck around Belbek Airbase in Russian-occupied Crimea, near Sevastopol.[2] The Russian-appointed governor of Sevastopol, Mikhail Razvozhaev, claimed that preliminary information indicated that Russian air defenses shot down a Ukrainian drone and caused no damage.[3] Video of a large explosion that circulated on social media in the immediate aftermath of the reported explosions was from a previous engagement on August 8 and is not from the vicinity of the airbase.[4]

Russian sources also claimed that Russian air defenses shot down a drone near the Kerch Bridge between Crimea and Russia on the night of August 18 as social media footage showed active air defenses in the area.[5] Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak had tweeted on August 17 that the Kerch bridge was illegally constructed and "must be dismantled."<sup>[6]</sup> The railway side of the Kerch bridge is an important target for Ukraine to disrupt Russian logistics capabilities into occupied Ukraine. Social media videos also claimed to depict active Russian air defenses at a Russian base in Nova Kakhova in southern Kherson oblast the night of August 18, suggesting a possibly coordinated series of Ukrainian attacks, if there were attacks, or drone overflights.[7]

ISW cannot independently verify whether Russian air defenses shot down a Ukrainian UAV, or whether any UAV was present in Kerch or Belbek. A Russian social media user posted video claiming to be at Belbek on the evening of August 18, showing no apparent evidence of a strike there.[8] Ukrainian forces will likely continue their campaign to strike Russian military targets in Russian-occupied Crimea to degrade Russian logistics capabilities and degrade Russian capabilities to sustain operations on the west bank of the Dnipro River, as ISW previously assessed.[9] However, it is unclear at the time of publication whether the reported explosions are due to Ukrainian attacks or reconnaissance, poor Russian handling of military equipment, successful Russian air defenses, or nervous Russian defenders who are likely

steeling themselves for additional attacks in areas that the Russian military had believed until now to be out of the range of Ukrainian forces.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appears to be setting information conditions to blame Ukrainian forces for future false flag operations at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP).** The chief of Russia's Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Defense Forces, Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, claimed in an August 18 briefing that Ukrainian forces are preparing for a provocation at the Zaporizhzhia NPP and that the provocation is meant to coincide with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres' visit to Ukraine.<sup>[10]</sup> Kirillov accused Ukrainian forces of preparing to stage this provocation in order to blame Russia for causing a nuclear disaster and create a 30km-wide exclusion zone around the NPP.<sup>[11]</sup> Kirillov's briefing, which was amplified by the Russian MoD, coincides with reports that Russian authorities told Russian NPP employees to not come in to work tomorrow, August 19.<sup>[12]</sup> Leaked footage from within the plant shows five Russian trucks very close to one of the reactors at the NPP on an unspecified date, which may indicate the Russian forces are setting conditions to cause a provocation at the plant and to shift the information narrative to blame Ukraine for any kinetic events that occur on the territory of the plant.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- There were no claimed or assessed Russian territorial gains in Ukraine on August 18, 2022 for the first time since July 6, 2022.
- Russian sources reported a series of unidentified and unconfirmed explosions across Crimea on the night of August 18.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense may be setting information conditions to blame Ukraine for a false flag attack at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian forces conducted ground assaults south of Siversk and northeast and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued conducting offensive operations north, west, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful ground assault on the Zaporizhzhia axis.
- Ukrainian officials confirmed additional strikes on a Russian military base and warehouse in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin is likely leveraging established Cossack organizations to support Russian force generation efforts.
- Russian occupation officials continued preparations for the long-term integration of occupied territories of Ukraine into Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 17, 8:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian military leadership is likely increasingly losing confidence in the security of Crimea following recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian military objects in Crimea. Russian sources reported on August 17 that Vice Admiral Viktor Sokolov had replaced Admiral Igor Osipov as the commander of the Crimean-based Black Sea Fleet (BSF).<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian information space, however, was evidently eager to maintain a high level of secrecy regarding Sokolov's appointment due to the claimed threat of "terrorist danger" in Sevastopol.<sup>[2]</sup> Recent Ukrainian strikes (associated with Ukrainian partisans and Ukrainian Armed Forces) on Russian military assets in Crimea, including the headquarters of the BSF in Sevastopol, have likely placed Russian forces on high alert and led to the restructuring of force composition, logistics, and leadership of the Russian grouping in Crimea in order to mitigate the impact of further strikes. Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate, for example, reported that Russian forces are relocating dozens of fixed and rotary wing aircraft stationed in forward airfields in Crimea to areas deeper in the Crimean Peninsula and in mainland Russia.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Russian leadership and the Russian nationalist information space have become increasingly invested in framing recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian military assets in Crimea as acts of terrorism in order to shift the information narrative away from Russian violations of international law and calls on the West to designate Russia a state sponsor of terrorism.** Russian sources inaccurately described the strikes on the BSF headquarters, an ammunition depot, and the Saki Airbase as acts of terrorism. The Russian-appointed head of occupied Crimea, Sergey Askenov, claimed on August 17 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in Crimea had neutralized cells of the Hizb ut-Tahrir organization (an Islamist fundamentalist political organization that has historically been active in Central Asia and in Crimea amongst the Crimean Tatar community and is banned in Russia) in Dzhankoi and Yalta.<sup>[4]</sup> Aksenenov accused the Ukrainian government of coordinating Hizb ut-Tahrir's operations in Crimea without providing any evidence. Russian officials will likely increasingly link Ukrainian partisan attacks against occupied territories with operations conducted by organizations affiliated with Islamist extremism in an attempt to alienate the Ukrainian partisan movement from the international community and undermine Ukraine's calls to officially designate Russia as a state-sponsor of terrorism. Attacks against legitimate Russian military targets fall well within the purview of legal use of force and are not acts of terrorism, nor is there any evidence to suggest that Islamist extremists conducted these attacks.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian military leadership is falsely claiming that recent attacks on Russian military objects in Crimea are terrorist attacks to deflect calls to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism.**
- **Russian forces attempted several unsuccessful assaults near the Kharkiv-Donetsk Oblast border in tactically challenging forest areas.**
- **Russian forces continued to unsuccessfully attack settlements southeast of Siversk.**
- **Russian forces launched several assaults northeast and south of Bakhmut, and are likely attempting to improve tactical positions near Horlivka.**
- **Russian forces made limited gains northwest of Donetsk City and near the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast administrative border.**
- **Russian forces are likely preparing to defend their ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in the Melitopol-Tokmak-Berdiansk triangle by mining settlements on the eastern Zaporizhia Oblast frontline.**
- **Russian federal subjects are continuing to form new volunteer units and advertise contract service while facing recruitment challenges.**
- **Russian occupation authorities are struggling to increase control measures in occupied territories amidst increased partisan activity.**

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 16**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 16, 9 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian and Ukrainian sources reported explosions at an airfield and a critical Russian supply nexus in Crimea on August 16.** Local reports and videos show a series of explosions at a Russian ammunition depot and a transformer substation in Dzhankoi District and an airfield near Hvardiiske, Crimea.<sup>[1]</sup> These explosions both caused significant damage to Russian resources and seriously disrupted Russian logistics. Russian forces have used Dzhankoi as a railway hub for transporting troops and equipment to occupied settlements in southern Zaporizhia Oblast, including Melitopol.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian authorities temporarily suspended passenger rail service from Russia into Crimea following the attack.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Ukrainian forces have not officially claimed responsibility for these explosions.** The *New York Times* reported that an anonymous senior Ukrainian official attributed the explosions in Dzhankoi District to "an elite Ukrainian military unit operating behind enemy lines," but no Ukrainian official has publicly come forward to claim responsibility.<sup>[4]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense released a statement calling the explosions "a result of sabotage."<sup>[5]</sup>

A Ukrainian strike on logistical targets in Crimea, which is the sovereign territory of Ukraine, would not violate Ukrainian commitments to Western partners regarding Ukraine's use of

**Western-supplied weapons within Ukrainian territory or stated US policy regarding Ukraine's right to use force to regain control of all its territory including areas seized by Russia in 2014.**  
[6] There are no indications that Ukrainian forces used US-supplied weapons in recent strikes on Crimea, and it is unlikely that they did since the targets are well beyond the range of the US-provided systems.

**Attacks on Russian positions in and around Crimea are likely part of a coherent Ukrainian counter-offensive to regain control of the west bank of the Dnipro River.** Russian supply lines from Crimea directly support Russian forces in mainland Ukraine including those in western Kherson Oblast. Ukraine's targeting of Russian ground lines of communication and logistic and support assets in Crimea is consistent with the Ukrainian counteroffensive effort that has also targeted bridges over the Dnipro River and Russian logistical support elements in occupied Kherson Oblast.[7] The net effects of this campaign will likely be to disrupt the ability of Russian forces to sustain mechanized forces on the west bank of the Dnipro River and to defend them with air and artillery assets on the east bank from Ukrainian counterattacks.

**The Kremlin continues efforts to misrepresent its likely maximalist goals in Ukraine.** ISW assesses that Russian strategic objectives remain unchanged: changing the regime change in Kyiv and securing territorial control over most of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin omitted mention of territory outside of Donbas while describing the goals of Russia's war in Ukraine on August 15. Putin closed his preliminary remarks to the Army-2022 forum on August 15 with the claim that Russian and Donbas forces are "doing their duty" to fight for Russia and "liberate" Donbas.[8] Such a limited statement of Russian goals sharply contrasts with previously articulated Russian war goals to "denazify" and "demilitarize" all of Ukraine. Putin's relatively limited statement additionally is incompatible with Russian actions to integrate occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts into the Russian Federation.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces conducted ground attacks across the Eastern Axis but failed to advance northwest of Slovyansk and east of Siversk.
- Russian forces are launching offensive operations around Bakhmut, southwest of Avdiivka, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in northern and northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that Ukrainian forces in Nikopol are preparing to conduct provocations at the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant, possibly setting information conditions for further shelling of Nikopol or provocations of its own.
- Chechen units are reportedly relocating to Kherson Oblast to police Russian military deserters.
- Russian forces struggle to recruit soldiers even for safe, prestigious jobs.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 15**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 15, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Elements of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) militia reportedly refused to continue fighting in Donetsk Oblast and complained about the grueling pace of offensives outside of Luhansk Oblast.** The emotional significance of recent Russian targets in Donetsk Oblast resonates with audiences in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), but not with LNR audiences tired of grueling offensives beyond their claimed borders. Several Ukrainian channels shared a video on August 15 of soldiers from LNR Battalion 2740 refusing to fight for the DNR.[1] The soldiers claim that they celebrated victory on July 3, when LNR forces reached the borders of Luhansk Oblast, and that their work is done. At least one Russian milblogger has criticized the LNR servicemembers for desiring Russian support for their own "liberation" and then refusing to fight in Donetsk Oblast.[2] ISW cannot independently verify the origin or authenticity of this particular video. Its message reflects a larger trend of diminished LNR investment in and morale to support the Russian war in Ukraine, however. This trend is particularly dangerous to Russian forces seeking to recruit still more new soldiers from Luhansk Oblast to make up for recent losses. Further division within Russian-led forces also threatens to further impede the efficiency of the Russian war effort.

DNR units have previously recorded similar appeals when operating in Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Kherson Oblasts, which may indicate that proxy troops might not fully support the Kremlin's expansive invasion plans. ISW has previously reported that servicemen of the 3rd Infantry Battalion of the DNR's 105th Infantry Regiment complained when the unit was redeployed from Mariupol to Luhansk Oblast in late May.<sup>[3]</sup> The 113th Regiment of the DNR also published a similar appeal from the Kherson Oblast frontlines in early June.<sup>[4]</sup> Another serviceman of an unspecified DNR battalion complained that Russian border guards held the unit at the Belgorod Oblast border after the unit fought around Kharkiv City in mid-May to allow Russian units to withdraw first.<sup>[5]</sup> DNR-based war correspondents have been boasting about the DNR progress around Avdiivka, but such attitudes may sour again if the DNR units are recommitted to another axis.

**Russia's annual Technical Forum and Army Games which began in Moscow on August 13 do not represent any immediate military threat to Ukraine.** The forum and army games are not military exercises. The forum is the Kremlin's premier annual military-industrial complex exposition and generates reliable arms sale revenue, which the Kremlin uses to supplement income lost due to sanctions.<sup>[6]</sup> The Army Games are a complementary series of competitive military sporting events that the Kremlin uses to demonstrate Russian weapons systems in the field and develop relationships with foreign militaries. This year's Army Technical Forum will be held from August 15 to August 21 and the Army Games will run from August 13 to August 27.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- A reported video of LNR servicemen refusing to fight in Donetsk Oblast suggests further division among Russian-led forces.
- Russian forces attempted several limited ground assaults northwest of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces conducted multiple offensive operations east and southeast of Siversk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued conducting offensive operations northwest, west, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground assault north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to trade accusations of shelling the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- St. Petersburg authorities officially denied summoning local men to military recruitment and enlistment centers for discussions of contract service.
- Russian occupation authorities continued preparations for the integration of occupied territories of Ukraine into Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 14, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian and proxy troops in Ukraine are likely operating in roughly six groups of forces oriented on Kharkiv City and northeastern Kharkiv Oblast; along the Izyum-Slovyansk line; the Siversk-Lyschansk area; Bakhmut; the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area; and Southern Ukraine. The Kharkiv City and Siversk-Lyschansk groups are likely built around cores drawn from the Western and Central Military Districts respectively. The Izyum-Slovyansk axis is increasingly manned by recently formed volunteer battalions that likely have very low combat power. Wagner Group private military company (PMC) soldiers are in the lead around Bakhmut, while forces drawn from the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) predominate in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area. Troops from the Southern Military District (SMD) likely formed the original core of forces in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts but have been reinforced with troops of the Eastern Military District, Airborne Forces, and Rosgvardia. None of these groupings is homogeneous—elements of various military districts, proxy forces, volunteer units, and other formations are scattered throughout the theater.

These dispositions suggest that Moscow is prioritizing the advance around Bakhmut and, possibly, toward Siversk with its Russian forces while seeking to draw on the enthusiasm of DNR forces to seize ground they have failed to take since 2014 on the Avdiivka axis. The high concentration of volunteer battalions around Izyum and Slovyansk suggests that that area is not a focus of Russian attention and may be vulnerable to Ukrainian counterattacks. The congeries of forces in and around Kherson Oblast may pose significant challenges to Russian command and control, especially if Ukrainian forces press a counteroffensive there.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian and proxy troops in Ukraine are operating in roughly six force groupings.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks north of Kharkiv City, northwest of Sloviansk, east of Siversk, and made unspecified gains around Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly struck a Wagner force concentration in Popasna, Luhansk Oblast, inflicting casualties.
- Forty-two states called on Russian forces to withdraw from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Enerhodar, just two to four hours before another strike hit Enerhodar.
- Ukrainian forces struck the Antonivsky road bridge, likely keeping all three road bridges to and on the right bank of the Dnipro inoperable to heavy equipment.
- Russian military recruitment and enlistment centers continue to face challenges in incentivizing Russians to sign military service contracts.
- Russian occupation authorities continued rubleization measures and civilian data collection in occupied territories to set conditions for annexation referenda.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
August 13, 8pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces are continuing efforts to disrupt Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that support Russian forces on the right bank of the Dnipro River.** Ukrainian forces struck the bridge on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) dam again on August 13, reportedly rendering the bridge unusable by heavy vehicles. [1] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command had previously reported on August 10 that the Kakhovka HPP dam bridge was unfit for use.[2] The Kakhovka bridge was the only road bridge Russian forces could use following Ukrainian forces' successful efforts to put the Antonivsky road bridge out of commission. The UK Defense Ministry has claimed that Russian forces now have no bridges usable to bring heavy equipment or supplies over the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast and must rely mainly on the pontoon ferry they have established near the Antonivsky road bridge.[3] ISW cannot confirm at this time whether Russian forces can use the Antonivsky rail bridge to resupply forces on the right bank of the Dnipro River.

Russian forces cannot support mechanized operations at scale without a reliable GLOC. Bringing ammunition, fuel, and heavy equipment sufficient for offensive or even large-scale defensive operations across pontoon ferries or by air is impractical if not impossible. If Ukrainian forces have disrupted all three bridges and can prevent the Russians from restoring any of them to usability for a protracted period then Russian forces on the west bank of the Dnipro will likely lose the ability to defend themselves against even limited Ukrainian counterattacks.

Indicators of degraded Russian supplies resulting from the disruption of Russian GLOCs over the Dnipro River would include: observed fuel and ammunition shortages among Russian forces in western Kherson Oblast; abandoned Russian vehicles; decreased intensity and, finally, cessation of Russian ground assaults and artillery attacks; possibly increased instances of Russian looting; increased reports from Russian soldiers about supply shortfalls; increased numbers of Russian prisoners of war taken by Ukrainian forces; and an observed absence of new heavy machinery transported to western Kherson. Such indicators could take days or weeks to observe depending on how much Russian forces have been able to stockpile supplies on the west bank of the Dnipro and how successful Ukrainian forces are at finding and destroying those stockpiles while keeping the bridges inoperable.

Ukrainian Mykolaiv Oblast Head Vitaly Kim reported that unspecified Russian military command elements left upper Kherson Oblast and relocated to the left bank of the Dnipro River, suggesting that the Russian military leadership is concerned about being trapped on the wrong side of the river.[4] Ukrainian Advisor to the Minister of Internal Affairs Rostislav Smirnov also stated that Russia has deployed 90% of its air assault forces (presumably 90% of those deployed in Ukraine) to unspecified locations in southern Ukraine to augment Russian defenses or possibly prepare for Russian counteroffensives.[5] It is unclear whether the Russian airborne units Smirnov mentioned are concentrated exclusively in Kherson Oblast or also deployed near Zaporizhia. Elements of the Russian 7th Airborne Division are known to

be operating in Kherson Oblast as of at least August 10.[6] The concentration of Russian Airborne Forces in western Kherson Oblast could indicate Russian efforts to use forces to defend against a Ukrainian counteroffensive that they are more likely to be able to exfiltrate by air if they are unable to hold the Ukrainians back or reestablish their GLOCs. Airborne forces are easier to move by aircraft than regular mechanized forces, of course, although the Russians could find it challenging and very risky to try to move forces by air given Ukrainian attacks on airfields in Kherson Oblast and Russian failure to secure air superiority.

**Russian forces may be reprioritizing advances in northeastern Donetsk Oblast in order to draw attention from Ukrainian counteroffensive actions in Southern Ukraine.** Russian forces had seemingly scaled back offensive actions east of Siversk and conducted sporadic and limited ground attacks while relying heavily on artillery barrages of surrounding settlements since August 6.[7] However, since August 11, Russian forces have increased the number of limited ground attacks in the Siversk area.[8] These attacks, along with continued assaults in the direction of Bakhmut, may constitute an effort to draw Ukrainian materiel and personnel to the Bakhmut-Siversk line in northeastern Donetsk Oblast in order to detract Ukraine's attention from critical areas in the South, where Ukrainian troops have been conducting effective counterattacks and may be setting conditions to launch a counteroffensive.[9] Russian forces may hope to shift both tactical and rhetorical focus away from the south in order to alleviate pressure on their own operations along the Southern Axis. ISW will continue to monitor the situation around Siversk.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces are continuing efforts to disrupt Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that support Russian forces on the right bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces may be reprioritizing efforts in northeastern Donetsk Oblast in order to draw Ukrainian attention away from the Southern Axis.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk, east of Siversk, and south and east of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground assault north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian and Ukrainian authorities accused each other of shelling the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian authorities are failing to pay Russian reservists and members of volunteer units for service in Ukraine.
- Russian-backed occupation authorities are likely dealing with internal challenges that are complicating efforts to administer occupation regimes and institute restoration projects in decimated areas of Donbas.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 12**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 12, 9:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin is reportedly attempting to mobilize industry to support prolonged war efforts in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Kremlin initiated the “industrial mobilization” of the defense enterprises in early August, banning some employees and the entire leadership at the Russian state industrial conglomerate company Rostec from taking vacations.[1] The GUR added that the Military-Industrial Commission of the Russian Federation, chaired by Russian President Vladimir Putin, is preparing to change the state defense order program by early September to increase expenditures by 600-700 billion rubles (approximately \$10 billion). Russian outlet *Ura* also reported that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu likely visited the Uralvagonzavod factory, the largest tank manufacturer in Russia and the producer of Russia’s T-72 main battle tanks, on August 12.[2] The GUR previously reported that Uralvagonzavod faced financial issues due to Western-enforced sanctions and failure to meet state contract obligations.[3] If true, Shoigu’s visit could suggest that the Kremlin is attempting to restart or expand the operation of the military-industrial complex. ISW has previously reported that the Kremlin has been conducting a crypto-mobilization of the Russian economy by proposing an amendment to the federal laws on

Russian Armed Forces supply matters to the Russian State Duma on June 30.[4] The amendment obliges Russian businesses, regardless of ownership, to fulfill Russian military orders and allows the Kremlin to change work conditions for employees. Putin signed the amendment on July 14, which indicates that the Kremlin will continue to introduce more measures to expand the Kremlin's direct control over the operations of Russia's military-industrial complex.[5]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted ground attacks east of Siversk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks southwest and northwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces destroyed the last functioning bridge Russian forces used to transport military equipment near the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant.
- Ukrainian officials confirmed additional Ukrainian strikes on Russian ammunition depots and a logistics point in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian regional officials may be misrepresenting percentage fill of newly formed volunteer battalions.
- Ukrainian partisans are likely targeting Russian occupation officials and Ukrainian collaborators who are preparing for the sham annexation referenda to disrupt the Russian annexation of occupied Ukraine.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 11

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 11, 9:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The US State Department called on Russian forces to cease all military activity surrounding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and support the creation of a demilitarized zone amidst new reports of shelling at the ZNPP on August 11.[1] The US State Department also called on Russia to return control of the plant to Ukraine.

**Ukrainian and Russian occupation authorities accused each other of shelling the ZNPP on August 11.** Ukraine's nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom reported that Russian shelling damaged the area of the commandant's office, storage of radiation sources, and the nearby fire station.[2] The fire station is approximately 5km east of the ZNPP. The Ukrainian Strategic Communications Center stated that Russian forces are deliberately staging provocations at the ZNPP and are carrying out dangerous experiments involving power lines to blame Ukrainian forces at the United Nations (UN) Security Council.[3] Russian-appointed Zaporizhzhia Oblast Occupation Administration Head Yevgeniy Balitsky claimed that Ukrainian shelling damaged the "Kakhovskaya" high-voltage power line, resulting in a fire and a large cloud of smoke seen on social media footage from the city.[4]

**Russian officials have previously accused Ukraine of striking positions of crucial significance to Ukrainians – such as the falsely-claimed HIMARS strike on the Olenivka colony in occupied Donetsk Oblast.** A CNN investigation concluded that "there is almost no chance that a HIMARS rocket caused the damage to the warehouse where the prisoners were being held."[5] Russians may be continuing a similar narrative around the ZNPP to discourage further Western support to Ukraine. ISW cannot independently verify the party responsible for the shelling of the ZNPP.

**Russia's 64th Separate Guards Motor Rifle Brigade (64th SGMRB) of the 35th Combined Arms Army (CAA) has likely been destroyed in combat, possibly as part of an intentional Kremlin effort to conceal the war crimes it committed in Kyiv Oblast.** Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFEFL) investigative journalist Mark Krutov conducted an investigation into the brigade following its participation in atrocities in Bucha and concluded that after heavy fighting on the Izyum and Sloviansk axes, the brigade has largely ceased to exist.[6] Krutov stated that out of 1,500 soldiers who were in the brigade before the war, 200 to 300 were likely killed.[7] Krutov quoted CNA Russia Studies director Michael Kofman's estimates that the typical ratio for those killed to those wounded in action is around 1 to 3.5, which would mean that the 64th SGMRB suffered up to 700 to 1,000 wounded in action.[8] It is typical for Russian units that are so severely degraded during combat to be disbanded and survivors

reallocated into other combat elements, but Krutov noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin cannot disband the 64th SGMRB without embarrassment. Putin had awarded the brigade the honorary "guards" designation on April 18, following the emergence of evidence that it had committed war crimes in Bucha.[9] The brigade was rushed back into combat in eastern Ukraine after it had completed its withdrawal from around Kyiv without much time to rest, refit, receive replacements, or recover. Speculation at the time ran that the Kremlin was eager to have the brigade destroyed in combat to avoid revelation of its war crimes.[10]

**Ukrainian intelligence warned that the Kremlin is setting conditions to launch an informational attack on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in an effort to discredit him.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Russian Presidential Administration approved the creation of a new informational task force within the Russian special services responsible for establishing the fake "Zelensky Foundation." [11] The foundation will feature an unspecified falsified proposal targeting foreign aid organizations and will operate as a "multi-level marketing" scheme likely focusing on recruitment in European countries. The GUR noted that the main concept behind the foundation is to distribute misinformation in the European media sphere. The GUR noted that as of August 10, Russian special services had created a site for the foundation, prepared social media fake screenshots and comments, and established a network of bloggers to promote the foundation. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar echoed similar concerns that Russia has intensified its information operations by spreading rumors in an effort to create friction between Ukrainian military and political officials.[12]

**A collection of complaints sent to the Russian military prosecutor's office and verified by Bellingcat and the Insider included instances of Russian authorities tricking or coercing conscripts into taking combat positions, limiting the extent of information provided to the families of Russian soldiers, and failing to provide soldiers with basic food or medical care.** The archive includes reports that Russian commanders have ordered soldiers to launch assaults with no equipment, refused to allow soldiers to quit or to dismiss them for clearly fileable offenses, and failed to notify soldiers' relatives of their death.[13] The report also highlighted complaints from residents of occupied Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts that accused Russian forces of looting, trespassing, and firing military equipment from civilian infrastructure.

**Ukrainian General Staff Main Operations Deputy Chief Oleksiy Gromov stated that Ukrainian forces were not responsible for explosions at the Zyabrovka airfield near Gomel, Belarus overnight on August 10-11.** [14] The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MOD) claimed that an inspection run caused an engine fire at the Zyabrovka airfield and that there were no casualties. [15] Senior Advisor to Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya Franak Viacorka amplified local reports of at least eight explosions near the Zyabrovka airfield. [16] Social media video footage showed flashes near the airfield.[17]

#### Key Takeaways

- The US State Department called on Russian forces to cease all military activity surrounding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) amidst new reports of shelling at the ZNPP.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks east of Siversk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks on the north and southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian officials confirmed additional Ukrainian strikes on Russian command posts and ammunition depots along the Southern Axis.
- Russia's Khabarovsk Krai is forming two new volunteer battalions.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 10

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Angela Howard, Layne Philipson, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 10, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian officials framed the August 9 attack in Crimea as the start of Ukraine's counteroffensive in the south, suggesting that the Ukrainian military expects intense fighting in August and September that could decide the outcome of the next phase of the war.** A Ukrainian official told *Politico* on August 10 that "you can say this is it" when asked about the start of Ukraine's planned counteroffensive.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky vaguely noted on August 10 that the war "began with Crimea and must end with Crimea - with its liberation."<sup>[2]</sup>

**Russian officials remain confused about the August 9 attack on the Saki Air Base in Russian-occupied Crimea, over 225km behind Russian lines, which destroyed at least eight Russian aircraft and multiple buildings.** Satellite imagery confirmed reports from Ukraine's air force that the attack destroyed at least eight Russian aircraft, contradicting Russian claims that the explosions did not damage any aircraft and were not the result of an attack.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian outlets shared conflicting stories: the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed on August 9 that munitions had been detonated at a storage site at the airfield due to negligence, not an attack, and claimed that no aircraft were damaged.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian milblogger Rybar claimed on August 10 that the explosion was likely not caused by a missile strike and hypothesized that the explosions could be due to negligence and non-compliance with safety regulations or to a small helicopter with a bomb attacking a nearby parking lot.<sup>[5]</sup> Mixed stories in Russian media and among Russian milbloggers indicate that either officials within the Russian Ministry of Defense have competing theories regarding the attack and are sharing them with the media, or that the Kremlin has failed to coordinate its information operation to deny that Ukraine conducted a successful attack so far behind Russian lines. Russian forces at the airbase likely know by now what happened but may not yet understand how or from exactly where Ukrainian forces conducted the attack.

Ukrainian officials are playing up the evident Russian confusion surrounding the attack to obfuscate Ukraine's longer-range capabilities. An anonymous Ukrainian official told the *New York Times* that the attack was carried out with the help of partisans.<sup>[6]</sup> Another anonymous Ukrainian official told the *Washington Post* that Ukrainian special forces caused the explosion, while other Ukrainian officials implicitly referenced the attack but did not overtly take credit for it.<sup>[7]</sup> ISW still cannot independently assess what caused the explosions at the airfield—satellite imagery depicts multiple craters and scorch marks, but such damage could have been caused by many things—special forces, partisans, or missiles, on-site or from a distance.

Nevertheless, Ukrainian military officials took credit for two long-range missile strikes on an ammunition depot in Novooleksiivka in Henichesk district (north of Crimea) and on the battalion tactical group (BTG) command post of the 217th Guards Airborne Regiment in the Maksyma Horkoho on the southwestern Kherson Oblast coast.<sup>[8]</sup> The settlements are situated 100km and 170km south of frontlines along the Kherson Oblast administrative border respectively. Ukraine's claimed attacks demonstrate longer-range missile capabilities but do not demonstrate the range they would have needed to hit the Saki Air Base from along the front lines. Ukrainian forces have various systems that they could have used or modified to hit Russian military infrastructure in Crimea or southern Kherson Oblast.

**The Kremlin's changing plans suggest that occupying forces will likely move up the date of the annexation referenda in occupied Ukraine.** The advisor to Ukraine's Kherson Oblast Civil Military Administration, Serhiy Khlan, claimed on August 10 that occupation forces have stopped discussing September 11 as a date for Russia's sham referenda on the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories.<sup>[9]</sup> ISW previously assessed September 11, the date that polling will be held in local and regional elections across the Russian Federation, to be the most likely date for annexation referenda to be held.<sup>[10]</sup> Khlan noted that Russian occupation forces had referred to September 11 as the date of the sham referenda, "but now the dates are again unclear." Occupation authorities have taken measures to be able to hold sham referendums at any time—ISW reported on August 3 that Russian forces would offer easily manipulated "online voting" in the Donetsk Oblast referendum and reported on August 7 that occupation forces in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast were planning door-to-door "surveys" of the local population.<sup>[11]</sup>

The political, military, economic, and other consequences of a prolonged Russian military occupation of southern and eastern Ukraine would be devastating to the long-term viability of the Ukrainian state.<sup>[12]</sup> The performative drama of annexation will not change the on-the-ground realities created by the brutal Russian occupation. Forced passportization, rubleization, "filtration," and other "integration" measures already underway in Russian-occupied areas are far more important and damaging to Ukraine than the referenda would be.<sup>[13]</sup>

**Ukrainian nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom Head Petro Kotin suggested that Ukrainian forces interrupt power lines leading to the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) should Russian forces start disconnecting the ZNPP from the Ukrainian power system.**<sup>[14]</sup> Kotin told

Reuters on August 9 that Russian forces intend to damage all power lines to the ZNPP and connect the plant to the Russian power grid, effectively stealing the ZNPP from the Ukrainians.[15]

**The Embassy of Uzbekistan in Russia cautioned the Uzbek diaspora that any form of participation in the Russian invasion of Ukraine is punishable by up to 10 years in Uzbek prison, effectively denouncing Russian volunteer recruitment efforts among Central Asian immigrants.** The Embassy noted that Uzbek law prohibits all citizens from engaging in mercenary activity and warned Uzbeks to stay clear of any "provocations." [16] ISW has previously reported that the Chairman of the Society of Central Asian Uzbeks of Perm Krai, Jahongir Jalolov, called on Uzbek nationals living or working in Perm Krai to form a volunteer battalion in Perm Krai to support Russian forces in Ukraine. [17] Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan supported Jalolov's proposal and celebrated the loyalty of the Uzbek diaspora in Russia. [18] The Embassy statement was likely a response to Jalolov's announcement.

**Iran reportedly began training Russian forces on Iranian UAV systems in recent weeks, demonstrating the deepening military cooperation between Iran and Russia.** A US official told CNN that "Russian officials conducted training in Iran as part of the agreement for UAV transfers from Iran to Russia," citing newly declassified US intelligence. [19] Russia launched a satellite on Iran's behalf on August 9, likely in exchange for the drones and other military equipment and economic collaboration. [20] Iran may leverage new Russo-Iranian aviation deals to transfer UAVs to Russia for use in Ukraine. [21]

**Note:** ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian officials remain confused about the August 9 attack on the Saki Air Base in Russian-occupied Crimea, over 225km behind Russian lines, which destroyed at least eight Russian aircraft and multiple buildings.
- The Kremlin's changing plans suggest that occupying forces are most likely to move up the date of the annexation referenda in occupied Ukraine. Annexation makes it harder to imagine any negotiated settlement to the war on any terms that Ukraine or the West could accept, demonstrating that the Kremlin is fundamentally unserious about ending the war on any terms short of a Ukrainian surrender.
- Iran reportedly began training Russian forces on Iranian UAV systems in recent weeks, demonstrating the deepening military cooperation between Iran and Russia.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks west of Izyum.
- Russian forces continued limited ground assaults northeast and west of Bakhmut and likely made marginal gains in these areas.
- Russian forces made marginal gains northwest of Donetsk City and are continuing attempts to push northwestward from current footholds on the outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted multiple unsuccessful offensives north and northeast of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful reconnaissance-in-force operation in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russia's Oryol Oblast is reportedly forming a volunteer battalion.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 9

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Angela Howard, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Ukrainian General Staff made no mention of Izyum in its 1800 situational report on August 9, nor did other prominent Ukrainian sources despite Western sources' claims of an ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in this area.** This silence represents a noteworthy departure from previous Ukrainian coverage of the Kharkiv–Donetsk axis.

**Russian and Ukrainian sources reported a series of large explosions deep within Russian-occupied Kherson Oblast and Crimea on August 9, but Ukrainian officials have not claimed responsibility for them as of the time of this publication.** Social media users reported witnessing 12 loud explosions at the Saky airbase in Novofedorivka on the Crimean western coast.<sup>[1]</sup> Social media footage only showed the large cloud of smoke and the aftermath of the incident.<sup>[2]</sup> Social media footage also showed a large smoke cloud near Novooleksiivka in Henichesk district, in the vicinity of the Kherson Oblast–Crimean border.<sup>[3]</sup> Advisor to the Kherson Oblast Administration Serhiy Khlan reported that explosions occurred on the Russian ammunition base but noted that there is no official confirmation of Ukrainian involvement in the incident.<sup>[4]</sup>

**The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that several aircraft munitions detonated in the storage areas of the Saky airbase due to poor fire protocol, rejecting reports that Ukrainian strikes or sabotage at the military facility caused the explosions.**<sup>[5]</sup> The Russian Defense Ministry added that the incident did not result in any casualties or damage to Russian aviation equipment. The Russian Health Ministry claimed that five civilians were wounded in the incident, however.<sup>[6]</sup> Social media footage also showed firefighters extinguishing a burning plane, which also contradicts the original Russian Defense Ministry claim.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian-appointed Head of Crimea Sergey Aksyenov claimed that Russian officials are only evacuating a few residents in homes near the airbase, but social media footage showed long traffic jams approaching the Crimean bridge and the departure of several minibusses, reportedly with evacuees.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan claimed that the incident was a result of sabotage rather than a missile or rocket strike.<sup>[9]</sup> Russian milbloggers voiced differing opinions regarding the origin of the strike, with some speculating that Ukrainian forces used US-provided long-range army tactical missile systems (ATACMS).<sup>[10]</sup> Ukrainian forces do not have the ATACMS systems, however.

**The Kremlin has little incentive to accuse Ukraine of conducting strikes that caused the damage since such strikes would demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Russian air defense systems, which the Ukrainian sinking of the *Moskva* had already revealed.** ISW does not yet have any basis independently to assess the precise cause of the explosions. The apparent simultaneity of explosions at two distinct facilities likely rules out the official Russian version of accidental fire, but it does not rule out either sabotage or long-range missile strike. Ukraine could have modified its Neptune missiles for land-attack use (as the Russians have done with both anti-shipping and anti-aircraft missiles), but there is no evidence to support this hypothesis at this time.

**Russia launched an Iranian satellite into orbit on August 9 that could be used to provide military intelligence on Ukraine.** Iranian Space Agency Head Hassan Salariyah stated that the remote-sensing satellite, Khayyam, has a one-meter camera resolution.<sup>[11]</sup> Khayyam has already begun broadcasting telemetry data.<sup>[12]</sup> Iranian officials have denied that another state will have access to satellite feed at any point, but Western intelligence officials have claimed that Russian authorities will maintain access.<sup>[13]</sup>

**Note:** ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western

**reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.**

### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces conducted ground attacks to the southeast of Siversk and around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces ground attacks north of Donetsk City and southwest of Donetsk City near the Zaporizhia–Donetsk Oblast border.
- Several large explosions hit Russian positions near Sevastopol and north of Crimea, but Russia did not blame Ukraine for them and Ukraine has not taken credit for them.
- Russia launched a surveillance satellite for Iran.
- Western media has reported that a Ukrainian counteroffensive is underway near Izyum, but the Ukrainian General Staff was notably completely silent about the area in its evening report.
- Russian sources suggested that recently-formed volunteer battalions are responsible for much of the Izyum sector.
- Ukrainian officials claimed that Russian forces continued to fire artillery systems from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian officials are continuing to take prominent roles in preparing for the sham referenda in Russian-occupied regions despite Kremlin claims that Russia is not conducting the referenda.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 8**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Layne Philipson, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 8, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Western and Ukrainian outlets circulated a report, likely false, of a Russian general allegedly threatening to destroy Europe's largest nuclear facility, the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), if Russia could not hold the plant. Multiple news outlets shared a screenshot from the Russian social networking site Vkontakte that claimed to cite the Russian head of the Zaporizhia occupation garrison, Major General Valery Vasilev, stating that Russia had mined the Zaporizhzhia NPP and that the plant would be "either Russian land or a scorched desert."<sup>[1]</sup> The screenshot appeared to be a news report posted in a Vkontakte group run by Russian outlet *Lenta Novosti Zaporizhzhia*. The outlet itself claimed that the screenshot was from a faked group and denied writing the report.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense condemned the report and screenshot as a "fake" and claimed that Vasilev was in Uzbekistan at the time he was purported to have made the statement to forces at Zaporizhzhia.<sup>[3]</sup> Regardless of the origin (or existence) of the original post, the reporting is unreliable. It is indirect and does not claim to cite an official statement or a statement made on any official Russian news or government website.

**This likely misreporting distracts from the very real risks of Russia's militarization of the Zaporizhzhia NPP, which may include mining the plant and almost certainly includes the unsafe storage of military armaments near nuclear reactors and nuclear waste storage facilities.**

[4] *Bellingcat* geolocated a drone video of the Zaporizhia NPP that was shared by Russian opposition outlet *The Insider* on August 5. The video depicts Russian military vehicles moving in and around the plant, including military trucks and armored vehicles moving around and into the building containing the first of the plant's six nuclear reactors.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian forces have also dug trenches in and around the plant and may have established firing positions.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian officials claim that Ukraine has repeatedly

attacked the plant, while Ukrainian officials claim that Russian forces are attacking Ukrainian positions from within the plant, preventing Ukrainian return fire and essentially using the plant as a nuclear shield.[7] Russian forces have repeatedly shelled the nearby Ukrainian-controlled town of Nikopol, likely from positions in or around the NPP, since July.[8]

ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are likely leveraging the threat of nuclear disaster to degrade Western will to provide military support to a Ukrainian counteroffensive.[9]

**Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.**

#### Key Takeaways

- Reporting of a likely falsified Russian statement distracts from the real risks of a Russian-caused nuclear disaster at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. Russian forces continue to conduct attacks from and store military equipment near the plant's nuclear reactors, likely to play upon Western fears of a nuclear disaster and degrade Western will to provide additional military support to Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks northwest of Sloviansk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks northwest and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian officials postponed reopening the Antonivskyi Bridge after a Ukrainian strike damaged the bridge and nearby construction equipment.
- Russian forces are deploying less-professional occupation forces and increasing pressure on Ukrainian populations in occupied areas.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 7, 8 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian occupation officials may be accelerating their preparations for illegitimate pseudo-referenda on the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory.** The Ukrainian Mayor of Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ivan Fedorov, reported on August 7 that resistance among Ukrainian residents has forced Russian authorities to "constantly" change their plans for a referendum. Fedorov claimed that occupation authorities had planned a single day of voting but are now considering seven days of "voting from home" in which armed Russian military personnel will go house to house and "interview" Melitopol residents.[1] Fedorov claimed that only about 10% of the civilians remaining in Melitopol support Russia's occupation and warned that Russian soldiers will threaten to shoot residents who do not vote for annexation.[2] Ukrainian Kherson Administration Advisor Sergey Khilan noted that occupation authorities have not fully set conditions for a referendum as of August 7 but are accelerating their preparation after a three-week pause in preparations, which Khilan attributed to Ukrainian HIMARS attacks on Russian occupation logistics.[3] Occupation authorities could also alter the timeline of their sham referenda in response to changing realities on the ground, including a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Khilan reported that the preliminary referendum date remains September 11.

By removing in-person voting options and transitioning to house-to-house surveys, Russian occupation authorities are increasing their opportunities to directly intimidate Ukrainian civilians. This effort is unnecessary to rig the vote to the outcome the Kremlin desires but does make any independent oversight of the vote nearly impossible. Occupation authorities may also turn these "surveys" into intelligence gathering operations to weed out Ukrainian opposition in occupied areas. Removing in-person polling stations removes many requirements for bureaucrats to staff those locations. Russian forces have struggled to recruit people into these positions from occupied populations. In-home voting also limits opportunities for partisan attacks on those locations.

The Kremlin may order different types of voting in different occupied locations depending on perceived local support, perceived risk of partisan attacks, and bureaucratic capacity. For example, the Ukrainian head of the Luhansk Oblast Civil-Military Administration, Serhiy Haidai, reported on August 7 that Russian occupation authorities in Luhansk Oblast have identified venues to host their sham annexation referendum in person.[4] Haidai reported that Russian occupation authorities are

actively campaigning for annexation by distributing propagandist newspapers and tying the provision of humanitarian aid including food, water, and construction materials to participate in the pseudo-referendum. Haidai said that the practice amounts to blackmail: "we [the Russians] will help you [Ukrainian civilians] meet your basic needs, while you go to the 'referendum.' Otherwise, die, and we will fabricate the result without you." Russia has occupied parts of Luhansk Oblast since 2014 and likely has greater capacity to mobilize collaborators to administer polling stations than in newly occupied areas. ISW reported on August 3 that occupation authorities in Donetsk Oblast may allow in-person and online participation, providing multiple levers for Russian officials to alter the results.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The Iranian Space Agency (ISA) denied reports on August 7 that Russia will use an Iranian satellite over Ukraine for several months after Russia launches the satellite on behalf of Iran.** State-run Iranian news outlet IRNA cited an ISA statement on August 7 asserting that the satellite will be controlled by and from Iran "from day one, immediately upon launch."<sup>[6]</sup> The ISA emphasized that "No other country will have access to such information, and rumors about satellite imagery being deployed in service of another country's military objectives are untrue." The *Washington Post* cited two Western intelligence officials' claims on August 4 that Russia would retain control of the satellite after launch to surveil Ukraine and would cede control of the satellite to Iran at an indefinite future date.<sup>[7]</sup> ISW reported on August 3 that the Kremlin is likely continuing efforts to leverage its relationship with Tehran in order to receive drones for use in Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> ISW cannot independently confirm which state will control the satellite, which Russia plans to launch from Kazakhstan on August 9.

**The UK Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) confirmed ISW's previous assessments that Russian military leadership has experienced major turn-overs due to Russian military failures in Ukraine.**<sup>[9]</sup> UK MoD reported that at least six Russian commanders have likely been dismissed from their posts since the beginning of the war in February, potentially including Eastern Military District (EMD) commander Colonel General Aleksandr Chayko and Western Military District (WMD) commander Colonel General Aleksandr Zhuravlev. UK MoD additionally stated that Army General Aleksandr Dvornikov has been removed from overall theater command of Ukraine and that Army General Sergey Surovikin has taken over the "Southern Grouping" of forces in Ukraine. UK MoD concluded that the lack of consistency in the Russian command structure and continued losses to military leadership on the battlefield are complicating command and control and the overall effectiveness of operations in Ukraine. ISW has previously reported on changes to Russian military command and continues to track the ramifications of these changes on Russian offensive capabilities.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Key Takeaways

- Russian military leadership continues to experience major turnover, which is likely impacting Russian command and control efforts in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest and southeast of Izyum, east of Siversk, and to the east and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces have likely made incremental gains in settlements on the northwestern and southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City and continued efforts to break Ukrainian defensive lines along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line of contact.
- Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance east of Mykolaiv City on August 7.
- Russian forces are forming a new 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade in Orenburg Oblast as part of the 3rd Army Corps.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 6, 9 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian and Ukrainian forces traded accusations of dangerous shelling at the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) on August 6 continuing the exchange of accusations ISW reported on August 5.<sup>[1]</sup> ISW cannot independently determine which party is responsible for the incident. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky condemned the alleged Russian shelling as an "open, brazen crime" and "an act of terror."<sup>[2]</sup> He called on the international community to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism and to sanction Russia's nuclear

industry. [3] Both sides claimed that the shelling caused a fire at the hydrogen station at the plant. The Russian-appointed head of the Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Administration, Evgeniy Balitskyi, claimed on August 5 that Ukrainian forces "decided to put the whole of Europe on the brink of a nuclear catastrophe" by shelling the plant.[4] The Ukrainian head of the Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration, Oleksandr Starukh, claimed on August 6 that Russian forces are trying to "provoke" Ukrainians into shelling the NPP to make the West hesitant to provide weapons to Ukraine.[5]

A Russian opposition outlet reported that Russian forces are storing explosives and ammunition around the nuclear power plant. *The Insider* reported on August 5 that a source claimed Russian forces mined the turbine room of energy block 1 of the NPP around August 2.[6] A separate source claimed that about 500 Russian soldiers, as well as armored personnel carriers and anti-aircraft guns, were stationed within the plant and that Russian forces mined the area around the plant. The second source said that Russian forces "store mines and ammunition in the immediate vicinity of the energy blocks, under trestles, with some of the ammunition stored inside the energy block." The second source was unsure "whether the energy block has been mined or is simply used for storing explosives." *The Insider* reported that Russian forces established Grad rocket batteries near the village of Vodyane, approximately 4 km from the NPP reactors (and approximately 2 km from the spent fuel containment units at the plant). Ukrainian channels and officials had reported in mid-July that Russian forces were firing on Nikopol—the Ukrainian town just across the river from the NPP—from near the nuclear reactors at Zaporizhzhia NPP.[7] Ukraine's Southern Military Command has subsequently reported that Russian forces have regularly shelled Nikopol with Grad rockets, damaging 47 houses on August 5 and 6.[8]

ISW previously assessed on August 3 that Russian forces are likely using the NPP to play on Western fears of a nuclear disaster in Ukraine in an effort to degrade Western will to provide military support to a Ukrainian counteroffensive, while also effectively using the plant as a nuclear shield to prevent Ukrainian strikes on Russian forces and equipment.[9]

**Note:** ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

#### Key Takeaways

- A Russian opposition outlet reported that Russian forces are storing explosives and mines in and around Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and may have mined parts of the plant. Russian forces may also be firing rockets at Ukrainian positions from within or near the plant.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk and east and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted a series of ground attacks to attempt to break through Ukrainian defensive lines north, west, and south of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations in southern Ukraine and continued to undertake defensive measures.
- Ongoing Ukrainian partisan activity and civilian resistance are frustrating Russian occupation forces as Russian occupation authorities continue to prepare for the integration of occupied territories into the Russian Federation following their upcoming sham annexation referenda.
- Russian state media advocated for labor camps, repressions, and shooting of Ukrainian partisans and civilians that refused to cooperate with Russian-appointed officials in occupied Ukrainian territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 5

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian officials confirmed that Russia is using Iranian-provided drones in Ukraine.** Advisor to the Ukrainian President's Office, Oleksiy Arestovych, stated on August 5 that Iran handed 46 drones over to Russia and that the Ukrainian government has already noted the use of

these drones in combat in Ukraine. [1] At least a portion of the provided drones are older-generation “Shahed 129” heavy strike drones, which Russian forces may seek to use to attack US-provided HIMARS in Ukraine. [2] It is unclear whether the 46 drones represent all the drones that Tehran has agreed to send, or the number of Iranian drones that are currently operating in Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials confirmed that Russian forces are using Iranian-provided drones in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground assaults on settlements south of Bakhmut.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces exchanged heavy artillery fire in Pisky, suggesting that Russian forces are unlikely to have full control of Pisky despite Russian claims.
- Russian forces conducted several limited ground assaults to the north, northwest, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces accused each other of firing rounds near the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar, but ISW cannot independently determine which party is responsible for the incident.
- Russian forces have repeatedly used artillery systems deliberately positioned within the complex to fire on targets across the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance on Lozove, Kherson Oblast, likely targeting the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River.
- Russian federal subjects are forming new volunteer battalions in Omsk and Samara Oblasts.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely accelerating passportization and rubleization efforts and civilian data collection in occupied territories in preparation for the upcoming pseudo-referenda on the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory into Russia.
- The Kremlin is continuing to replace Ukrainian collaborators in Russian occupation administrations with Russian officials, likely to prepare for formal Russian governance of annexed areas.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Phillipson, Karolina Hird, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 4, 9 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukraine is likely seizing the strategic initiative and forcing Russia to reallocate forces and reprioritize efforts in response to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.** Russian forces are increasingly transferring personnel and equipment to Kherson and western Zaporizhia Oblasts at the expense of their efforts to seize Slovyansk and Siversk, which they appear to have abandoned. Russian forces are also redeploying military equipment – artillery and aviation in particular – to Crimea from elsewhere in Ukraine. Russian forces have previously withdrawn from or suspended offensive operations on Kharkiv City and the southern axis to prioritize capturing Luhansk Oblast, but they did so on their own initiative based on the changing priorities of their commanders. Russian forces in this case appear to be responding to the Ukrainian counteroffensive threat in Kherson Oblast rather than deliberately choosing objectives on which to concentrate their efforts. Even after Ukrainian forces defeated the Russian attempt to seize Kyiv early in the war, the Russians were able to choose freely to concentrate their operations in the east. Ukraine's preparations for the counteroffensive in Kherson and the initial operations in that counteroffensive combined with the dramatic weakening of Russian forces generally appear to be allowing Ukraine to begin actively shaping the course of the war for the first time.

**The seriousness of the dilemma facing the Russian high command likely depends on Ukraine's ability to sustain significant counteroffensive operations on multiple axes simultaneously.** If Ukraine is able to press hard around Izyum as it continues rolling into the counteroffensive in Kherson, then Russian forces will begin confronting very difficult choices. They will likely need to decide either to abandon their westward positions around Izyum in favor of defending their ground lines of communications (GLOCs) further north and east or to commit more personnel and equipment to try to

hold the current front line. Such forces would have to come from another axis, however, putting other Russian gains at risk.

**Russian forces are likely operating in five to seven strike groups of unclear size around Bakhmut, based on the Ukrainian General Staff descriptions of Russian assaults in the area.** Recent Ukrainian General Staff reports have most frequently identified Vershyna, Soledar, Kodema, Bakhmut, and Yakovlyka as the repeated targets of localized concentrated Russian efforts around Bakhmut.<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian groups attacking these targets are reportedly operating out of the nearby settlements of Pokrovske, Streapivka, Roty, Semihirya, and Vidrozhnya for now.

**Explosions occurred near the Donetsk Drama Theater and Penal Colony #124 in occupied Donetsk City on August 4.**<sup>[2]</sup> Russian media widely publicized the explosions and blamed Ukrainian artillery, but the Ukrainian Office of the President denied any shelling of Donetsk City on August 4.<sup>[3]</sup> The limited damage visible in the videos Russia has produced as evidence of the Ukrainian attack near the Donetsk Drama Theater appears to be inconsistent with artillery shelling.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian officials have not provided footage of the reported attack on Penal Colony #124. Russian milblogger widely published the Russian-provided footage of the aftermath of the explosion near the Donetsk Drama Theater and used the opportunity to harshly criticize Ukrainian forces for alleged strikes on civilian targets.<sup>[5]</sup> Were the explosions Ukrainian shelling, they would carry further emotional weight with DNR supporters because they occurred during a farewell ceremony for an occupation forces officer KIA on August 3.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian forces likely hope to use the emotional response of DNR audiences to such claimed Ukrainian attacks to garner support for new offenses in the Avdiivka area and further recruitment campaigns.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukraine is likely seizing the strategic initiative and forcing Russia to reallocate forces and reprioritize efforts in response to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.
- Russian forces attempted to advance northwest of Izyum.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a series of localized counterattacks between Izyum and Sloviansk and regained positions in a number of settlements.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian troops continued attempts to advance on Pisky and conducted a limited ground attack southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued to transfer equipment and personnel to northeastern Kherson and western Zaporizhia Oblasts.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 3**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

**Russian forces are likely using Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar to play on Western fears of a nuclear disaster in Ukraine, likely in an effort to degrade Western will to provide military support to a Ukrainian counteroffensive.** International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said on August 3 that Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), which is currently occupied by Russian forces, is "completely out of control" and that "every principle of nuclear safety has been violated" at the plant.<sup>[1]</sup> He warned that Russian forces are not respecting the physical integrity of the plant and pleaded with Russia and Ukraine to quickly facilitate a visit of IAEA monitors to the complex. Russian Zaporizhia Occupation Administration Head Evgeniy Balitskyi responded that the IAEA was welcome at the plant: "We are ready to show how the Russian military guards it today, and how Ukraine, which receives weapons from the West, uses these weapons, including drones, to attack the nuclear plant, acting like a monkey with a grenade."<sup>[2]</sup> Russian officials are framing Ukraine as irresponsibly using Western-provided weapons and risking nuclear disaster to dissuade Western and other allied states from providing additional military support to Ukraine's looming southern counteroffensive.

Russian forces based around the NPP have attacked Ukrainian positions in Nikopol and elsewhere in recent weeks, intentionally putting Ukraine in a difficult position—either Ukraine returns fire, risking international condemnation and a nuclear incident (which Ukrainian forces are unlikely to do), or Ukrainian forces allow Russian forces to continue firing on Ukrainian positions from an effective “safe zone.” Ukrainian Mayor of Enerhodar Dmytro Orlov reported on August 3 that Russian forces launched rockets on Enerhodar from neighboring villages to falsely accuse Ukrainian forces of shelling Enerhodar and endangering the NPP.<sup>[3]</sup> ISW assessed on July 21 that Russian forces may be storing heavy military equipment in the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar to protect it from Ukrainian strikes.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian forces have also likely staged false flag attacks around Enerhodar since early July, as ISW previously reported.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Russian forces likely set fire to the prison complex holding Ukrainian POWs in occupied Donetsk Oblast but blamed Ukraine for an alleged precision strike using Western-supplied military equipment, likely to deter additional Western military support to Ukraine.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that it has determined that the Wagner Group deliberately set fire to the prison complex on July 28. This report is consistent with the damage observable in Russian-provided video of the site. The GUR reported that Wagner forces "mined" the building with unspecified flammable substances, which led to a rapid spread of fire throughout the building.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian-provided footage and commercial satellite imagery from the colony showed that the walls of the building were burned but still standing and did not reveal shell craters or other indicators consistent with an artillery strike. ISW previously reported that imagery from the site shows that the attack only damaged one building, did not collapse the walls of that building, and did not leave any shell craters in the vicinity, very strongly suggesting that the destruction of the prison was the result of either a precision strike or an internally planted incendiary or explosive.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian officials previously claimed that the deaths of the POWs were the result of a Ukrainian HIMARS strike, likely as a component of the ongoing Russian information operation attempting to dissuade the US from continuing to provide Ukraine with HIMARS.

**The Kremlin is likely continuing efforts to leverage its relationship with Tehran in order to receive drones for use in Ukraine.** Russian state-owned space agency Roscosmos announced on August 3 that Russia will launch a remote-sensing satellite (named “Khayyam”) into orbit on behalf of Iran on August 9.<sup>[8]</sup> The Kremlin may intend this launch to encourage or repay Tehran for the provision of Iranian drones that would be employed in operations in Ukraine, and possibly other military equipment or support. Iran has a huge ballistic missile arsenal and domestic missile manufacturing capabilities that it could provide to Russia in exchange for economic and military cooperation.<sup>[9]</sup> Iran has prioritized the development of its military space program in recent years and launched one satellite in April 2020 and one in April 2022. US and Middle Eastern officials stated as early as June 2021 that Russian officials were preparing to send a Russian-made Kanopus-V satellites to Iran, which would expand Tehran’s overall surveillance capabilities in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>[10]</sup> As ISW reported on August 2, Russian and Iran are likely continuing to facilitate cooperation through recently signed bilateral aviation agreements in order to bolster Russian military capabilities in Ukraine and assist Tehran with sanctions mitigation.<sup>[11]</sup>

**The Russian Defense Ministry has altered the focus of its reporting after the fall of Lysychansk, likely to orient on narratives that resonate positively with milbloggers and war correspondents rather than those that draw criticism from that community.** The Russian Defense Ministry has shifted its reporting style to focus on claims of declining Ukrainian morale and successful Russian strikes on Western-provided military equipment, rather than reporting on day-to-day Russian advances on the frontline.

[12] Russian forces have made limited gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka in recent days, but the Russian Defense Ministry has not claimed territorial gains around the theater since at least the fall of Lysychansk. Milbloggers, war correspondents, and other groups have criticized the Defense Ministry and the Kremlin for exaggerated and inaccurate claims of territorial gains, undermining Moscow's narratives and credibility.[13] The Defense Ministry apparently flirted with the idea of suppressing or attempting to control the milblogger community, but it seems instead to have opted to adjust its own narratives.

[14] The Defense Ministry is now letting milbloggers, war correspondents, and DNR officials cover the situation unfolding in Avdiivka, Pisky, and south of Bakhmut positively without making claims of its own that might draw criticism. Milbloggers released footage from the reported capture of the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft and on the southern outskirts of Pisky, where they celebrated recapturing small segments of years-long contested territory--but the Defense Ministry has made no statement on the subject.

[15] Some of the milbloggers such as Maksim Fomin (known under alias Vladelen Tatarzkiy) have previously served within DNR units and include anecdotes about their service in the Donetsk City area prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Such coverage of the war likely aims to boost morale among DNR and Russian fighters. The Kremlin or the Defense Ministry may have decided that the milbloggers and war correspondents are more credible sources for the constituencies it cares most about and realized that its own claims were losing credibility. They may alternatively be focusing on narratives that generate positive resonance within that community.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are likely using Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar to play on Western fears of a nuclear disaster in Ukraine, attempting to thereby degrade the will of Western powers to provide military support to a Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Russian forces likely set fire to the prison complex holding Ukrainian POWs in occupied Donetsk Oblast but blamed Ukraine for an alleged precision strike using Western-supplied military equipment, likely to increase US hesitancy to continue providing HIMARS to Ukraine.
- Moscow is likely to continue efforts to leverage its relationship with Tehran in order to secure drones for use in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack northwest of Slovyansk and continued efforts to advance on Bakhmut from the northeast, east, and southeast.
- Russian forces are prioritizing frontal assaults on Avdiivka and failed to gain ground in Pisky.
- Russian forces are reportedly forming a strike group to prevent Ukrainian counteroffensives in northern Kherson Oblast or counterattack against them.
- Russian occupation authorities may allow both in-person and online voting in upcoming pseudo-referenda on the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory into Russia, enabling more straightforward Russian vote rigging.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 2, 9 pm ET

Russian forces have likely decided to attack Avdiivka frontally from occupied Donetsk Oblast territory rather than waiting for Ukrainian forces to withdraw from their prepared defensive positions as a result of Russian envelopment operations northeast of the settlement. The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Kremlin-sponsored sources have published videos suggesting that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces out of their positions around the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft southwest of Avdiivka.[1] Ukrainian forces have held positions around the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft since 2015 and have described the location as the closest Ukrainian position to Donetsk City and a key defensive outpost for Avdiivka.[2] Russian forces have likely captured the Ukrainian position, given the Ukrainian General Staff's vague reports of "partially"

successful Russian advances in the area.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces are also continuing assaults on Pisky, west of Avdiivka, and will likely attempt to seize the E50 highway connecting the two settlements. Russian forces had previously attempted to break through Avdiivka's northeastern outskirts but have not made significant progress in months.

**The Russian Defense Ministry is likely trying to assuage distress that Ukraine's effective use of the US HIMARS is causing Russian military personnel and milbloggers with inaccurate claims of destroying HIMARS launchers.** Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed that Russian forces have destroyed six US-provided HIMARS and other Western-supplied military equipment in Ukraine in a conference call with the Russian Armed Forces leadership on August 2.<sup>[4]</sup> The Russian Defense Ministry also released a video claiming to have destroyed a building that housed two HIMARS launchers in Kharkiv Oblast on August 1.<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian Southern Command Chief Andriy Kovalchuk said that Russian forces did not destroy any HIMARS, and an unnamed Finnish official called Russian claims "wishful thinking."<sup>[6]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) also reported that Russian defense authorities are covering up Russian servicemember casualties by transporting wounded Russians in civilian cars and misreporting the number of casualties caused by Ukrainian HIMARS strikes in the media.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainian HIMARS strikes have prompted many milbloggers and military correspondents to express concern over the effectiveness of air defense systems and the threats to Russian logistics, and these strikes are likely demoralizing Russian servicemen on the ground.<sup>[8]</sup>

**A representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on August 2 that Russia has refused to provide detailed information on which Ukrainian POWs were killed or injured in the July 28 Olenivka prison attack.** GUR Representative Andriy Yusov said that Russia has not responded to requests by Ukraine's Coordinating Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs for information about casualties from the likely Russian-perpetrated attack on the Russian-controlled prison that killed at least 53 Ukrainian POWs.<sup>[9]</sup> Yusov said that of casualties that Russia has posted online some were supposed to be in hospitals or being readied for prisoner exchanges and were not supposed to be at the Olenivka prison. Yusov noted that Ukraine cannot confirm the veracity of online casualty lists at this time, however. Ukraine's Coordinating Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs urged families of POWs to avoid sharing personal details about themselves or their captured loved ones with individuals or unofficial organizations soliciting those details, warning that sharing information could pose a risk to surviving POWs.<sup>[10]</sup> Deputy Ukrainian Prime Minister Irina Vereshchuk said that Russia has not responded to requests to return the bodies of killed POWs to Ukraine as of August 2.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Initial and unconfirmed reports from August 2 suggest that Iran may have sent the first batch of UAVs to Russia for field testing.** A US-based open-source intelligence (OSINT) Twitter account citing unofficial Iranian sources claimed that Iran sent a batch of UAVs to Russia, along with Iranian pilots and technicians who will train for the use and repair of Russian Su-35 aircraft.<sup>[12]</sup> While ISW cannot independently confirm this claim, it is consistent with recent reports that Tehran and Moscow are pursuing greater aviation cooperation in order to circumvent international sanctions on Russia and Iran and support Russian operations in Ukraine.<sup>[13]</sup> If true, this claim suggests that Iran may be receiving Russian Su-35 aircraft in return for the drones, which could have been part of an agreement signed by Moscow and Tehran on July 26.<sup>[14]</sup> The agreement stipulated that Iran would increase the volume of passenger flights to Russia and additionally repair Russian aircraft.<sup>[15]</sup> Tehran may seek to use this agreement to facilitate the acquisition of Russian combat aircraft.

**A Russian missile strike reportedly damaged a Ukrainian air defense system in Lviv Oblast on August 2.**<sup>[16]</sup> The Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that Russian forces launched eight Kh-101 (Kh-555) missiles in the direction of central, southern, and western Ukrainian Oblasts from their positions in the Caspian Sea.<sup>[17]</sup> The Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that Ukrainian air defense forces intercepted seven of the eight missiles.<sup>[18]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Unconfirmed social media reports suggest that Iran may have sent the first batch of drones to Russia and sent pilots and maintenance personnel to train on the Russian Su-35, potentially suggesting that Iran may seek to use recent aviation agreements to facilitate the acquisition of Russian combat aircraft.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations northeast and northwest of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk and east of Siversk.
- Russian forces made marginal gains southeast of Bakhmut and continued offensive operations to the northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.

- Russian forces made incremental advances around Avdiivka and are continuing attempts to push southwest of Avdiivka.
- Russian forces launched two assaults in northern Kherson Oblast and are continuing to redeploy troops to the Southern Axis.
- Russian federal subjects are forming new volunteer battalions in Novosibirsk, Saratov, Ulyanovsk, and Kurgan Oblasts, and are changing time periods for enlistment compensations.
- Ukrainian civilians are continuing to resist the Russian occupation with acts of civil disobedience and partisan sabotage as the Kremlin considers longer-term methods of population control in occupied Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 1

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Katherine Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 1, 7pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces are reportedly continuing to transfer troops from northern Donetsk Oblast to support defensive positions in southern Ukraine and may be halting the Slovyansk campaign **for the time being**. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) Representative Vadym Skibitsky stated that Russian forces withdrew airborne tactical groups from Donetsk Oblast and redeployed the units to occupied Kherson Oblast territories two weeks ago.<sup>[1]</sup> Skibitsky added that Russian forces are also redeploying elements of the Eastern Military District (EMD) operating in Slovyansk to southern Ukraine and are transferring a large number of troops to Crimea to prepare to defend occupied Kherson and/or Zaporizhia Oblasts against Ukrainian counteroffensives. The UK Defense Ministry also noted that Russian forces likely identified Zaporizhia Oblast as a vulnerable front in need of reinforcement, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are regrouping in Zaporizhia Oblast.<sup>[2]</sup> Social media footage has showed Russian forces moving equipment and personnel to both Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts in recent weeks.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Russian withdrawal of some troops from northern Donetsk Oblast will deprive the Slovyansk effort of necessary combat power, in the same way that Russian forces neglected the Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts fronts during offensive operations in Luhansk Oblast. The withdrawal will likely create an opportunity for Ukrainian forces to launch a counteroffensive on the Izyum axis, just as Russian capture of Luhansk Oblast allowed Ukraine to set conditions for a counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast. The Russian redeployment of troops to Zaporizhia Oblast also suggests that Ukrainian counteroffensives are not confined to Kherson Oblast and will likely take place throughout the southern axis.

ISW assesses that Russian forces were responsible for the killing of 53 Ukrainian POWs in an explosion at a Russian-controlled prison in Olenivka, Donetsk Oblast on July 28. Two US officials anonymously confirmed to *Politico* on August 1 that no traces of US-provided High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), Ukraine's most precise artillery system, were found at the prison site.<sup>[4]</sup> The Kremlin alleges that Ukraine fired HIMARS and precision-guided rockets to kill Ukrainian POWs and deter Ukrainian defectors. Satellite and other imagery from the site indicate that the attack only damaged one building, did not collapse the walls of that building, and did not leave any shell craters in the vicinity, very strongly suggesting that the destruction of the prison was the result of either a precision strike or an internally planted incendiary or explosive.<sup>[5]</sup> One US official told *Politico* that "the evidence showed the attack was not conducted by Kyiv." If Ukraine had used something other than HIMARS to conduct the strike, the attack would almost certainly have left collateral damage around the facility, including craters and other damaged buildings. Given the US assessment that HIMARS were not used in the attack, ISW assesses that Russia was responsible for this attack on Ukrainian POWs in violation of the Geneva Conventions.

### Key Takeaways

- ISW assesses that Russian forces were responsible for the July 28 attack on the Olenivka prison that killed 53 Ukrainian POWs; two anonymous US officials confirmed that there is no evidence that Ukrainian forces used US-provided HIMARS, some of the only munitions Ukraine has that are precise enough to do the kind of limited damage seen in satellite and other imagery, to strike the prison.

- Russian forces are transferring elements of the Eastern Military District (EMD) from the Slovyansk area to support defensive positions along the Southern Axis.
- Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations north of Slovyansk or around Siversk.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground assaults on settlements south and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian proxy authorities did not claim any territorial gains near Avdiivka as Russian forces launched unsuccessful ground assaults on Avdiivka and Pisky.
- Russian regional officials are reportedly failing to provide promised payments to the “Atal” Volunteer Battalion of the Republic of Chuvashia.
- The Kremlin is likely prioritizing propaganda and sham referenda over the welfare of Ukrainian civilians in occupied Ukrainian territories.
- Russian occupation forces are likely increasing efforts to deter and suppress partisan movements in occupied territories as partisan attacks on Russian officials and Ukrainian collaborators continue.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 31

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

Russian forces have resumed localized ground attacks northwest and southwest of Izyum and may be setting conditions for offensive operations further west into Kharkiv Oblast or toward **Kharkiv City**. Russian forces have already launched unsuccessful assaults and reconnaissance-in-force attempts on Chepil, Shchurivka, and Husarivka (northwest of Izyum) and resumed assaults on Dmytrivka and Brazhikivka (southwest of Izyum) in recent days.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces maintained positions around Balaklia and Velyka Komyshuvakha for months and may use these two areas as springboards for an offensive operation. Russian forces may use their positions around Balaklia to restart assaults on Kharkiv City from the southeast. Russian forces are extremely unlikely to seize Kharkiv Oblast or capture Kharkiv City – the second most populated city in Ukraine – given the pace of Russian progress in Donbas and continued challenges in force generation and logistics. ISW has previously assessed that Russian President Vladimir Putin may have ordered Russian forces to take Kharkiv City and the unoccupied portion of Kharkiv Oblast but that he is unlikely to be successful in such goals. Russian forces may also be conducting spoiling attacks to prevent Ukrainian counteroffensives.

**Crimean occupation officials obliquely accused Ukraine of orchestrating a drone attack on the Russian Black Sea Fleet headquarters in occupied Sevastopol on July 31, but Ukrainian officials denied responsibility for the attack.**<sup>[2]</sup> Russian Governor of Sevastopol Mihail Razvozhaev claimed that Ukrainians “decided to spoil” Russia’s Navy Day celebrations and noted that a drone exploded in the headquarters’ yard but did not specify whether Ukrainian forces or locals launched the drone.<sup>[3]</sup> Razvozhaev published images showcasing minor damage to the headquarters building and yard, and social media footage depicted a small cloud of smoke rising from the building.<sup>[4]</sup> Razvozhaev also claimed that the explosion wounded six people. Russian Crimean Senator Olga Kovitidi later announced that unspecified actors carried out the attack with a makeshift drone from within the territory of Sevastopol.<sup>[5]</sup> The Ukrainian Naval Forces and Odesa Oblast Military Administration Spokesman Serhiy Bratchuk indirectly suggested that the drone attack was a Russian false flag operation.<sup>[6]</sup> ISW cannot independently verify the actor responsible for the attack.

**The Russian government may be complicating international efforts to discern the nature of an unidentified July 28 kinetic event on the Olenivka penal colony.** The Russian Ministry of Defense officially invited experts from the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to investigate the attack at the Olenivka prison on July 30.<sup>[7]</sup> The ICRC stated that it has not received access to the prison as of July 31, however.<sup>[8]</sup> Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereschuk also noted that Russian authorities have not responded to Ukrainian requests to return the bodies of deceased Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs).<sup>[9]</sup>

Open-source intelligence (OSINT) analyst Oliver Alexander published an examination of satellite imagery from July 27 showing open graves at the Olenivka prison, noting that July 29 satellite imagery appears to show that the same graves have been covered.<sup>[10]</sup> Investigative journalism group Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins stated that lower resolution satellite imagery indicates ground disturbances after July 18 and prior to July 21, suggesting that the Russians may have planned the incident in advance.<sup>[11]</sup> ISW will continue to monitor the open source for information on the strike on Olenivka and will provide updates as they appear.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin has not responded to the International Red Cross (ICRC) request to access the Olenivka prison as of July 31, hindering the international investigation efforts.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest and northwest of Izyum, consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces may be setting conditions for advances northwest of the current Izyum-Sloviansk line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks northwest of Sloviansk, northeast of Siversk, and to the east and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces made marginal gains in the Avdiivka area and continued ground attacks towards Avdiivka and Pisky.
- Russian authorities began recruiting volunteers for the Nevsky and Ladoga Battalions in Leningrad Oblast, Russia.
- Russian occupation authorities continued to prepare for a referendum in Kherson Oblast and took measures to depict support for Russian control of the occupied territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

July 30, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces are likely prioritizing offensive operations toward Bakhmut and around Donetsk City at the expense of efforts to take Siversk and Sloviansk. Russian commanders are likely seeking to exploit recent gains in the Novoluhanske area to pressure Bakhmut from the east. Their efforts around Donetsk City likely aim to push Ukrainian forces out of artillery range of the city. They may also be intended to gain as much ground in Donetsk Oblast as possible before planned referenda in September. Russian offensive operations are very unlikely to take Bakhmut, which is large and well-defended, or to make dramatic gains west of Donetsk City even if they manage to take the towns of Avdiivka and Pisky that have held out against their pressure since the original Russian invasion in 2014. Fighting in these areas will likely intensify, however, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is calling on residents to evacuate.[1]

Neither Russia nor Ukraine produced new evidence regarding the cause or responsibility for the deaths of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) at the Olenivka prison in occupied Donetsk Oblast. Russian officials raised the death toll of the event to 50 and released a list of deceased POWs.[2] Ukrainian officials stated that they are unable to verify the list at this time and called for an international investigation.[3] Maxar has provided post-strike imagery of the damage. ISW is unable to confirm the nature or cause of the incident, although it remains more likely that Russian forces were responsible.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted ground assaults around Bakhmut and the environs of Donetsk City as well as southwest of Izyum. One assault east of Bakhmut made limited gains.
- Russian forces did not conduct ground assaults near Siversk again, suggesting that they are deprioritizing operations in that area.
- Satellite imagery showed Russian reinforcements concentrated near the Ukrainian border on the ground line of communication (GLOC) leading toward Izyum.
- Ukrainian forces disrupted a Russian ground assault in Kherson Oblast with preemptive artillery strikes.
- Ukrainian officials claim that damage to the railway bridge across the Dnipro near Kherson renders Russian forces unable to resupply their positions on the west bank of the river by rail.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Phillipson, Katherine Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 29, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

A kinetic event killed and wounded scores of Ukrainian POWs in Russian-occupied Olenivka, Donetsk Oblast, on July 28.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukraine and Russia are blaming each other for the attack and available visual evidence appears to support the Ukrainian claim more than the Russian, but ISW cannot independently assess the nature of the attack or the party responsible for it at this time. The Russian Defense Ministry asserted that Ukrainian forces deliberately struck the Olenivka pre-trial detention center holding Ukrainian POWs including Azov Regiment servicemen using Western-provided HIMARS, killing at least 40 and wounding 75 POWs.<sup>[2]</sup> Kremlin-sponsored news outlet "RIA Novosti" published videos of the detention center, which showed fire damage but not the sort of damage that a HIMARS strike would likely have caused.<sup>[3]</sup> RIA Novosti also released footage of HIMARS missile fragments but provided no evidence that the fragments were recovered at Olenivka.<sup>[4]</sup> Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Ambassador to Russia Leonid Miroshnik claimed that Ukrainian forces struck the pre-detention center to eliminate the evidence of Ukrainian surrenders and prevent POWs from speaking out against the Ukrainian government.<sup>[5]</sup>

The Ukrainian General Staff said that Russian forces conducted the attack as a false flag operation to cover up Russian war crimes, disrupt the supply of Western weapons, discredit Ukrainian forces, and stoke social tensions within Ukrainian society.<sup>[6]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff stated that a deliberate explosion occurred near the newly-constructed penal colony, to which Russian forces had transferred Ukrainian POWs a few days earlier. The Ukrainian General Staff also noted that Ukrainian analysis of the damage to the building, intercepted phone conversations between Russian servicemen, the lack of reported shelling in Olenivka, and the absence of casualties among Russian personnel serving at the penal colony all point to a Russian deliberate "terrorist act" as the cause of the incident.<sup>[7]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) accused Wagner Group head Yevgeny Prigozhin of ordering the "terrorist act" without consulting with the Russian Defense Ministry, to conceal the embezzlement of funds allocated for the maintenance of Ukrainian POWs before an official inspection on September 1.<sup>[8]</sup> The Ukrainian Office of the General Prosecutor reported that the explosion killed at least 40 and wounded 130 Ukrainian POWs.<sup>[9]</sup>

ISW is unable to assess the nature of the event or the party responsible for it with any confidence at this time. We will update our assessment as more information becomes available.

#### Key Takeaways

- A kinetic event killed and wounded scores of Ukrainian POWs in Russian-occupied Donetsk Oblast on July 28. Ukraine and Russia are blaming each other for the attack. Available visual evidence appears to support the Ukrainian claim more than the Russian, but ISW cannot independently assess the nature of the attack or the party responsible for it at this time.
- Ground fighting continued north of Kharkiv City with no significant change in control of terrain.
- Russian forces attempted a limited ground assault in Kherson Oblast and continued conducting combat operations without creating strike groups along occupied lines.
- Russian regional outlets reported the recruitment and establishment of an additional volunteer battalion in the Republic of Buryatia and the formation of a reserve battalion in Novosibirsk.
- Members of Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party traveled to occupied Ukrainian territories to promote an organization called "We Are Together with Russia," likely to present the façade of a "grassroots" call for the Russian annexation of occupied Ukraine and to prepare for falsified annexation referenda.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Phillipson, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 28, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian grouping in Donetsk Oblast is likely seeking to capitalize on recent marginal gains southeast of Bakhmut by continuing to attempt to advance in that area. Russian forces may be de-emphasizing attempts to take Siversk in order to concentrate on Bakhmut, but it is too soon to tell. Russian forces continued efforts to advance northward on Bakhmut from recently gained positions around Novoluhanske and the Vuhlehirskaya Power Plant while pursuing southwestward advances along the T1302 highway from recently captured positions in Berestove. By contrast, Russian forces have been struggling to make concrete gains around Siversk and have not made any confirmed advances toward the city since the capture of the Luhansk Oblast Administrative border in early July. Russian command is likely, therefore, seeking to maintain momentum around Bakhmut, potentially at the expense of continued pressure on Siversk. Russian forces remain unlikely to take Bakhmut itself, despite recent incremental advances in its direction.

**Putin replaced Colonel-General Gennady Zhidko as deputy defense minister and head of the Main Military-Political Directorate on July 28.**[1] Putin signed a decree appointing Colonel-General Viktor Goremykin to Zhidko's position and has not publicly announced the appointment of Zhidko to a new position.[2] ISW previously reported that Zhidko would become the overall commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, a report that appears to have been incorrect.[3]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces in Donetsk Oblast likely seek to capitalize on recent marginal territorial gains around Bakhmut and may deprioritize efforts to take Siversk.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground assaults northwest of Slovyansk and northeast and southwest of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces may be intensifying offensive operations around Avdiivka to reduce Ukrainian strikes in and around Donetsk City.
- Russian forces may be setting conditions for renewed offensive operations toward Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces attempted a limited ground offensive on the Southern Axis but are likely facing territorial losses in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces are attempting to preserve their ground lines of communication over the Dnipro River connecting Kherson City to rear areas in eastern Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin continued measures to compensate for officer and manpower losses in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin is continuing to institutionalize its occupation administrations in occupied parts of Ukraine to prepare for sham referenda, annexation, and integration into Russia.
- Russian occupation forces are continuing to pressure Ukrainian civilians in occupied areas to use Russian rubles and passports and to attend Russian-run schools, setting conditions for longer-term social control in occupied territories.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 27, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces appear able to sustain only two significant offensive operations in Ukraine at this time, one attempting to seize Siversk and the other advancing on Bakhmut. These operations have focused on advances in the Siversk, Donetsk Oblast, direction from Verkhnekamianka and Bilohorivka and in the Bakhmut direction from the areas of Novoluhanske and the Vuhlehirskaya Thermal Power Plant since the end of the operational pause on July 16.[1] Russian forces have committed enough resources to conduct near-daily ground assaults and to seize territory on these two axes but have been unable to sustain a similar offensive operational tempo or to make similar territorial gains elsewhere in Ukraine. The Russian offensive, therefore, remains likely to culminate before seizing any other major urban areas in Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces currently appear able to sustain only two significant offensive operations in Ukraine, both in Donetsk Oblast, and the Russian offensive remains likely to culminate before seizing additional significant population centers.
- Ukrainian forces may have launched a localized counterattack southwest of Izyum.
- Russian forces attacked settlements east of Siversk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Ground fighting is ongoing north of Kharkiv City.
- Ukrainian forces struck the Antonivskyi Bridge for the third time in ten days on July 27, likely rendering it unusable.
- The Mari El Republic north of Kazan sent two volunteer battalions to train and is forming a third battalion to deploy to Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities are importing Russians to work in occupied territories due to a lack of Ukrainian collaborators.
- Mariupol occupation authorities continue withholding humanitarian aid to force civilians to cooperate with and work for the occupation administration.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 26, 7:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian-backed proxy leadership continues to enunciate deadlines for the capture of additional Ukrainian territory, likely to support ongoing preparations for referenda on the annexation of these territories to the Russian Federation. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Deputy Minister of Information Daniil Bezsonov stated on July 25 that the DNR expects to capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast by the end of August.<sup>[1]</sup> Various Russian and Western sources have previously reported that Russia intends to hold referenda in occupied areas by the first half of September, likely sometime around September 11, which is the unified voting day in the Russian Federation.<sup>[2]</sup> Proxy leadership and Russian-backed occupation authorities are likely pushing for deadlines for military objectives to support condition setting for expedited annexation objectives, although Russian forces remain unlikely to occupy significant additional territory in Ukraine before the early autumn annexation timeline.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian proxy and occupation leadership is enunciating expedited deadlines for the capture of Ukrainian territory to align with the Kremlin's efforts to prepare for the annexation of occupied territories into the Russian Federation.
- Russian forces gained marginal ground northeast of Bakhmut and are continuing to fight east and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted a limited attack northwest of Izyum, likely to secure Russian rear areas on the Izyum-Sloviansk line.
- Russian forces conducted limited attacks southwest of Donetsk City near the Zaporizhia Oblast border.
- Russian forces focused on defending occupied lines and conducted a limited ground assault in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian logistics nodes in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin is continuing to constitute regional volunteer battalions for deployment into Ukraine.
- Ukrainian intelligence leaks continue to reveal the Kremlin's annexation agendas for occupied Ukraine by way of falsified referenda.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 25, 8:00pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces made marginal territorial gains south of Bakhmut on July 25 but are largely suffering from the same fundamental limitations that previously prevented them from rapidly gaining substantial ground during offensive operations in Luhansk Oblast.** Geolocated social media footage from July 25 shows that troops of the Wagner Group Private Military Company (PMC) have advanced into Novoluhanske and Russian and Ukrainian sources noted that Russian forces are taking control of the territory of the Vuhledar Power Plant on the northern edge of Novoluhanske, likely as a result of a controlled Ukrainian withdrawal from the area.<sup>[1]</sup>

Russian Telegram channels began reporting on Russian attempts to advance on Novoluhanske as early as May 25, which means that Russian troops have been unsuccessfully attacking this single location for two months.<sup>[2]</sup> Novoluhanske is neither a large settlement nor is it characterized by particularly challenging terrain, yet Russian forces have impaled themselves on it for weeks.

The capture of Novoluhanske and the Vuhledar Power Plant will not generate an advantageous salient along which Russian troops will be able to advance northwards towards Bakhmut. The Russian campaign to seize the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area benefitted from the fact that they had already created a salient with those two cities near its apex. They were able continually to press on the flanks of Ukrainian defensive positions until they had secured Severodonetsk. They struggled after that to take advantage of the fact that Lysychansk remained at the apex of a salient until they managed to break out from Popasna to the south and drive northward. Siversk is currently the town closest to the apex of the remaining salient, and Russian forces have struggled to advance against it. The Russian seizure of Novoluhanske and the Vuhledar Power Plant, on the other hand, flattens the Ukrainian defensive line rather than perpetuating a salient, thereby limiting the advantage the occupation of those areas gives to the Russian forces.

The operations around Novoluhanske indicate that Russian forces are suffering the same limitations in terms of their ability to effectively use battlefield geometry (such as the creation of effective salients) to their advantage, which is exacerbated by the extreme difficulty Russian forces regularly have capturing small and relatively insignificant bits of terrain over weeks or months of fighting. These limitations will grow as Russian units continually degrade themselves during assaults on small villages. Russian forces are unlikely to be able to effectively leverage the capture of Novoluhanske to take Bakhmut, and the continual tactical and operational limitations they are facing on the battlefield will likely contribute to the culmination of the offensive in Donbas before capturing Bakhmut, Slovyansk, or any other major city in Donetsk Oblast.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces made marginal gains south of Bakhmut but are unlikely to be able to effectively leverage these advances to take full control of Bakhmut itself.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks north of Kharkiv City, east of Siversk, and east of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces are continuing to fortify and strengthen positions in Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts in anticipation of Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- Ukrainian forces are continuing to strike Russian strongholds along the Southern Axis.
- Russian forces continued to withdraw military equipment from storage in Omsk and faced challenges with repairing damaged combat vehicles.
- Russian occupation officials are continuing to set conditions for the annexation of occupied territories to the Russian Federation and to extend administrative control of occupied areas of Ukraine.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 24

**Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros and Frederick W. Kagan**

July 24, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian officials are increasingly acknowledging Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in Kherson Oblast.** Kherson Oblast Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated on July 24 that Ukrainian forces are undertaking unspecified counteroffensive actions in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on July 23 that Ukrainian forces are advancing "step by step" in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[2]</sup> His statement does not make clear whether he is referring to small, ongoing Ukrainian advances in Kherson Oblast or a broader counteroffensive.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported on July 24 that Ukrainian forces are firing on Russian transport facilities in Kherson Oblast to impede maneuverability and logistics support. This activity is consistent with support to an active counteroffensive or conditions-setting for an upcoming counteroffensive.<sup>[4]</sup> Khlan also said that Ukrainian strikes on Russian-controlled bridges around Kherson City only aim to prevent Russian forces from moving equipment into the city without stopping food and other essential supplies from entering the city.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Alarm in the Russian nationalist information space continues to grow as the pace of Russian operations slows in the face of successful Ukrainian high-mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) strikes on key Russian logistics and command-and-control nodes.** Moscow Calling, a medium-sized Russian Telegram channel with 31,000 subscribers, posted an appraisal of the entirety of Russian operations in Ukraine since February 24.<sup>[6]</sup> Moscow Calling defined three distinct phases of the war—the first spanning from initial invasion to the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kyiv, Sumy, and Chernihiv Oblasts and the second spanning between that point and the introduction of Western-provided HIMARS.<sup>[7]</sup> Moscow Calling notably defined the arrival of HIMARS as a distinct turning point in the war and stated that previously provided Western weapons systems (such as NLAWs, Javelins, Stingers, and Bayraktars) did very little against Russian artillery bombardment (they are not designed or intended to counter artillery attack), but that HIMARS changed everything for Russian capabilities in Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> Moscow Calling strongly insinuated that recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian warehouses, communication hubs, and rear bases are having a devastating and potentially irreversible impact on the development of future Russian offensives.<sup>[9]</sup>

This post is consistent with previous reports from Western defense officials that Russian troops are being forced to engage in various HIMARS mitigation tactics on the battlefield, including camouflage measures and constantly changing the location of equipment groupings.<sup>[10]</sup> These mitigation tactics are impeding Russian forces from conducting the massive artillery barrages that they have widely employed over the course of the war, as evidenced by NASA Fire Information for Resource Management (FIRMS) data that shows consistently fewer observed heat anomalies over the frontline in Donbas since the introduction of HIMARS to Ukraine.

[Source: NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System over Donbas, July 15 – July 23 and Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, and the GIS User Community]

**The Kremlin is likely facing mounting (if still very limited) domestic dissent from within ethnic minority enclaves, which are disproportionately bearing the brunt of the Kremlin's force generation efforts.** Vasily Matenov, founder of the "Asians of Russia" organization, stated in early July that he had officially registered the organization in order to advocate for "endangered and small-numbered peoples who are discriminated against by the Russian state."<sup>[11]</sup> Matenov emphasized that the preliminary goal of "Asians of Russia" is to stop the war in Ukraine due to devastating statistics on the combat deaths of soldiers from minority groups.<sup>[12]</sup> Similarly, Advisor to Ukraine's Minister of Internal Affairs Anton Gerashchenko cited Ukrainian sources that claim Russian authorities pay triple amounts to families of deceased soldiers from Moscow compared to families of soldiers from the minority-dominant region of Buryatia.<sup>[13]</sup> As ISW has previously reported, protest groups in ethnic minority enclaves have already formed in Tuva and Buryatia, and these communities will likely continue to protest the Kremlin's reliance on drawing combat power from peripheral groups of Russian society.<sup>[14]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials are increasingly acknowledging Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin is facing mounting (if still very limited) domestic dissent from ethnic minorities who are disproportionately bearing the burden of the Russian war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces attempted limited ground assaults northwest of Slovyansk, east of Siversk, and south of Bakhmut on July 24.
- Ukrainian strikes have damaged all three Russian-controlled bridges leading into Kherson City within the past week.

- Russian forces attempted limited ground assaults in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin continued constituting regional volunteer battalions and is leveraging private military companies' recruitment drives to generate combat power.
- Russian occupation authorities continued setting conditions for annexation referenda in occupied territories and are recruiting Russian civilians for reconstruction efforts.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 23, 6:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces are likely preparing to launch or have launched a counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast as of July 23, but open-source visibility on the progress and tempo of the counteroffensive will likely be limited and lag behind events.** Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Administration Adviser Serhiy Khlan stated on July 23 that Ukrainian forces have seized unspecified settlements in Kherson Oblast but called on Ukrainian civilians to remain silent on the progress of the counteroffensive until Ukrainian authorities release official statements.<sup>[1]</sup> Foreign Policy National Security Reporter Jack Detsch reported on July 22 that an unspecified senior US defense official stated that Ukrainian forces have recaptured unspecified "portions of Russian-occupied villages" in Kherson over the past week of July 15-22, indicating that Ukrainian forces have made some unspecified territorial advances along frontlines.<sup>[2]</sup> The area between the front line and Kherson City is rural and primarily composed of small settlements that are less likely to report on force movements and engagements, allowing control-of-terrain in this area to change without evidence appearing in open-source reporting. Russian authorities additionally have no incentive to report on Ukrainian territorial gains. The informational dynamics that allow ISW to report on Russian offensive operations with relatively little lag are thus inverted in this situation. ISW will report on the progress of any Ukrainian counteroffensives to the best of its ability within these constraints.

**Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov seemingly confirmed that Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev has replaced Army General Aleksandr Dvornikov as acting commander of Russia's Southern Military District (SMD).**<sup>[3]</sup> Kadyrov stated that Kuzovlev, to whom he explicitly referred as acting commander of the SMD, visited Chechnya on July 23 in order to inspect Kadyrov's "Akhmat" battalions.<sup>[4]</sup> Kuzovlev had previously served as chief of staff of the SMD and commanded the Russian grouping in Syria from November 2020 to February 2021.<sup>[5]</sup> Kuzovlev's visit and inspection of Kadyrov's forces, which comes two days after Kadyrov announced that these battalions will not be immediately deploying into Ukraine, may support other hints that Kadyrov is facing mounting domestic pressure.<sup>[6]</sup> The anti-Kadyrov Sheikh Mansour battalion reportedly announced an insurgency against Kadyrov's regime on July 21, and Kadyrov may want to hold the newly formed Akhmat battalions in Chechnya to handle any local unrest.<sup>[7]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces are likely preparing to launch, or have already launched, a counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast.
- Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov indicated that Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev is the acting commander of the Southern Military District.
- Russian forces conducted limited reconnaissance operations east of Bakhmut and continued limited ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk, east of Siversk, and south of Bakhmut.
- The Kremlin continued to form regional volunteer battalions and likely intends to have 16 such battalions formed by the end of July.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing to prepare for referenda on the annexation of occupied areas into the Russian Federation and are taking measures to isolate occupied areas from the non-Russian information space.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 22, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The United States announced a new \$270 million security package for Ukraine, and Ukrainian officials detailed their procedures for keeping track of Western weapons on July 22.<sup>[1]</sup> The US package includes an additional four high mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS), 36,000 artillery ammunition rounds, anti-armor systems, and 580 Phoenix Ghost drones.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksii Danilov reiterated that the Ukrainian government is employing multiple monitoring mechanisms to keep track of weapons deliveries to Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukraine's Modern Information and Analytical System of the Main Situational Center (COTA) reportedly allows Ukrainian officials to monitor the status of arms deliveries to Ukrainian frontlines and works in tandem with NATO's LOGFAS logistics and accounting control system.<sup>[4]</sup> Danilov's statement is likely a response to an ongoing Russian information operation that seeks to discount Ukraine as a trustworthy recipient of Western military aid.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- The United States announced an additional \$270 million security package for Ukraine.
- Ukrainian officials reiterated that they are employing monitoring mechanisms to track and account for the delivery of Western weapons to Ukrainian frontlines.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks east of Siversk and to the east and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance northwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited positional battles north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted localized ground attacks near the Kherson-Mykolaiv Oblast border.
- Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov announced that the newly-formed Chechen "West-Akhmat" battalion will not be immediately deployed into Ukraine and will stay in Chechnya.
- Head of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Denis Pushilin signed a cooperation agreement with the occupation head of Kharkiv Oblast, indicating that the Kremlin intends to integrate Kharkiv Oblast into the Russian Federation.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 21, 5:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces conducted a few limited and highly localized ground attacks on July 21. The current Russian operational tempo is not markedly different from what it was during the officially declared operational pause between July 7 and July 16. Russian forces continued to conduct minor attacks throughout that period to the northwest of Slovyansk and around the Siversk and Bakhmut areas without capturing any decisive ground.<sup>[1]</sup> Since July 16, Russian troops have continued local attacks to the east of Siversk as well as east and south of Bakhmut; they have not made any major territorial gains in these areas as of July 21. The Russian grouping northwest of Slovyansk has in fact conducted fewer ground attacks along the Kharkiv-Donetsk Oblast border than it did during the official operational pause. The lack of successful ground attacks beyond the Slovyansk, Siversk, and Bakhmut areas is consistent with ISW's assessment that the Russian offensive is likely to culminate without capturing Slovyansk or Bakhmut.<sup>[2]</sup>

Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on July 21 that Russian troops have used up to 55-60% of Russia's pre-war reserve of high-precision missiles.<sup>[3]</sup> GUR spokesperson

Vadym Skibitsky specified that these high-precision missiles include Kh-101, Kh-555, Iskander, and Kalibr systems, which he stated Russian forces have been using less frequently, partially due to the effect of Western sanctions on the availability of needed components for high-precision systems.<sup>[4]</sup> On the other hand, Ukrainian forces have recently acquired an influx of Western-provided high-precision systems such as high mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS), which they are using to a more decisive effect than the Russians have been achieving with their precision systems. Russian forces will likely continue to employ their reserves of lower-precision Soviet weapons systems, but the decisiveness of these strikes, compared to the impact of Ukrainian HIMARS strikes, is likely to remain limited.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- The current Russian operational tempo is not markedly different from the pace of Russian offensive operations during the official Russian operational pause, and Russian forces are unlikely to be able to take significant ground in the coming weeks.
- Russia has likely used as much as 55-60% of its high-precision weaponry reserve.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks to the east of Siversk and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful ground attack north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces may be storing equipment in Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant facilities to protect it against Ukrainian strikes.
- Russia's Murmansk Oblast is reportedly forming a volunteer battalion.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 20, 6:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The current Russian offensive may secure limited additional territorial gains in Donbas northeast of the E40 highway but will likely culminate before seizing major populated areas such as Slovyansk or Bakhmut. Russian forces have not made significant advances towards Slovyansk or along the Siversk-Bakhmut salient in the past few weeks and are continuing to degrade their own offensive combat power in localized fights for small and relatively un-important settlements throughout Donetsk Oblast. Russian troops have notably been attempting to take Siversk since the capture of Lysychansk and the Luhansk Oblast border on July 3 and have still not reached the city as of July 20.<sup>[1]</sup> Similarly, Russian troops have failed to launch direct assaults on Bakhmut and have largely impaled themselves on fights for small settlements to its east and south. Efforts to advance on Slovyansk have mostly ground to a halt and have made no meaningful gains for weeks. The renewal of active ground offensives following the brief operational pause has not yet translated into meaningful Russian forward progress, although it is possible that either steady Russian pressure or the completion of Russian efforts to rebuild combat power could generate limited gains in the coming days or weeks.

Russian troops are now struggling to move across relatively sparsely-settled and open terrain. They will encounter terrain much more conducive to the Ukrainian defenders the closer they get to the E40 around Slovyansk and Bakhmut due to the increasing population density and built-up nature of these areas (see map in-line with text). The current Russian offensive in Donbas is therefore highly likely to culminate somewhere along the E40 in the coming weeks.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov articulated expanded geographical aims for Russian operations in Ukraine on July 20, confirming ISW's long-held assessment that Russia has territorial goals beyond Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Lavrov held an interview with state-owned media outlet RT's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan wherein he stated that the geography of the "special operation" has changed since March and now includes not just the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, but also Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts and a number of other unspecified territories.<sup>[2]</sup> Lavrov also warned that these goals will expand if the West continues to provide Ukraine with long-range weapons. Lavrov's calls for maximalist territorial objectives are notably divorced from

the slow and grinding reality of recent Russian operations in Ukraine as discussed above. Ukrainian counteroffensive pressure is complicating Russian efforts to consolidate military control of occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts, and it is unclear how the Kremlin will generate the offensive combat power needed to take significant new amounts of Ukrainian territory.

**The Russian Defense Ministry publicly identified Lieutenant General Andrey Sychevoy as the commander of the Western force grouping in Ukraine on July 20.[3]** The Russian force groupings in Ukraine appear to follow the structure of established Russian military districts. Ukraine's Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) had previously reported that Sychevoy replaced Commander Alexander Zhuravlev as the Western Military District Commander.[4] Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu instructed Sychevoy to focus on destroying Ukrainian UAVs operating near the Ukraine-Russia border, indicating that the Western force grouping is likely operating on the Kharkiv City Axis.[5] Russian forces have thus apparently split Kharkiv Oblast into two axes: the Western force grouping operating towards Kharkiv City and the Eastern force grouping operating in the Izyum-Sloviansk direction.[6]

**The Russians have identified commanders of the southern, central, and eastern groups of forces, corresponding to their respective military districts and oriented on Bakhmut, the Izyum area, and Siversk respectively. They have notably failed to identify any commander of Russian forces operating in occupied southern Ukraine, however.** The Russian commander of forces on the Southern Axis could be the commander of the Russian 7th Guards Mountain Airborne (VDV) Division based in Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai, or of the Black Sea Fleet's 22nd Army Corps, based in Simferopol, Crimea, respectively, as there is no other obvious military district from which he might be drawn.[7]

**Ukrainian troops rescued a cat during clearing operations on Snake Island and evacuated it back to the Ukrainian mainland on July 20.[8]** The cat reportedly survived the duration of the Russian occupation of the island.

#### Key Takeaways

- The current Russian offensive will likely make marginal territorial gains northeast of the E40 highway in Donetsk before culminating along the E40.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia is pursuing expanded territorial gains in Ukraine beyond Luhansk and Donetsk Oblast, confirming ISW's assessment that the Kremlin seeks to capture territory beyond Donbas.
- Russian forces resumed limited ground attacks northwest of Sloviansk and around the Donetsk City-Avdiivka area.
- Russian forces continued localized ground assaults east of Siversk and made marginal gains northeast of Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces conducted the second consecutive high-precision strike against the Antonivskyi Bridge- a major Russian logistics artery east of Kherson City.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely propagandizing recent Ukrainian high-precision strikes and partisan activity to set conditions for mass deportations of Ukrainian citizens to Russian territory.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Katherine Lawlor, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 19, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Calls among Russian nationalist and pro-war voices for Russian President Vladimir Putin to expand Russia's war aims, mobilize the state fully for war, and drop the pretext that Russia is not engaged in a war reached a crescendo on July 19. Former Russian militant commander and nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin presented an extensive list of military, economic, and political actions that he argues the Kremlin must take to win the war in Ukraine; first among this list is abandoning the rhetoric of the "special military operation" and defining the official goals of the war in Ukraine.[1] Girkin advocated for expansive territorial aims beyond the Kremlin's stated ambitions in Donbas, including the reunification of the entire territory of "Novorossiya" (which Girkin maintains includes Kharkiv,

Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts as well as Kryvyi Rih) with the Russian Federation and the creation of a Malorossiya state (all of Ukraine up to the Polish border), which Girkin claims should be reunified with Russia through the Russia-Belarus Union State. Girkin also called for the Kremlin to shift the Russian economy fully to a war footing and to carry out extensive mobilization measures including forced conscription and the (further) suspension of Russians' rights.[2] Girkin has often criticized what he views as a lack of ambition and decisive action in the Kremlin's handling of the war in Ukraine through his calls for maximalist objectives and measures to support territorial gains. His newest list of demands adds to the growing discontent within the Russian pro-war nationalist zeitgeist.[3]

**While Girkin's July 19 post is an acerbic critique of the Kremlin's intentions in Ukraine, other Russian milbloggers sought to shape a narrative favoring Putin while advancing the same maximalist aims by suggesting that the Kremlin has been purposefully setting conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine since the war began.** Russian milblogger Yuri Kotylenok claimed that Russia has been pursuing the "Syrianization" of the war in Ukraine by never articulating specific deadlines or goals for operations in Ukraine.[4] The explicit invocation of protracted Russian operations in Syria suggests that certain Russian nationalist voices are setting conditions for a long war in a way that saves face for the Kremlin given Russia's failure to secure its military objectives in Ukraine in the very short period that the Kremlin initially planned.

**Putin could simply ignore the milbloggers, although he has shown concern for their positions in the recent past, or he could play off their narratives in several ways.[5]** He might wait and see what resonance their calls for full mobilization and broader war aims have within the portions of the Russian population he cares most about. He might hope that their semi-independent calls for more extreme measures could fuel support for an expansion of aims and mobilization that he desires but feels Russians remain unprepared to accept. He may instead reject their calls for grander ambitions and greater sacrifices, thereby presenting himself as the moderate leader refraining from demanding too much from his people.

**US officials reported that Russia plans to annex occupied Ukrainian territory as soon as autumn 2022, confirming ISW's May 2022 assessment.** US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby announced that the Kremlin is beginning to roll out a version of its 2014 "annexation playbook" in Ukraine and is "examining detailed plans" to annex Kherson, Zaporizhia, and all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, citing newly declassified intelligence.[6] Kirby confirmed ISW's long-running assessment that the Kremlin has installed illegitimate proxy officials, forced use of the ruble, replaced Ukrainian telecommunications and broadcast infrastructure with Russian alternatives, and forced Ukrainians to apply for Russian passports to accomplish basic tasks in occupied territories.[7] As ISW wrote on May 13, Putin's timeline for annexation is likely contingent on the extent to which he understands the degraded state of the Russian military in Ukraine.[8] He may intend to capture the remainder of Donetsk Oblast before annexing all occupied territories, which would likely force him to postpone annexation. Russia's degraded forces are unlikely to occupy all of Donetsk Oblast before Russia's September 11 unified voting day for local and gubernatorial elections across the country, the most likely date for annexation referenda to be held.[9] The Kremlin could also postpone these Russian regional and local elections to limit expressions of domestic dissatisfaction with the Russian invasion of Ukraine—*independent Latvia-based Russian language newspaper Meduza* reported in May that members of Russia's Federal Security Service and National Security Council were lobbying to postpone the September 2022 elections.[10]

**Putin could leverage nuclear threats to deter a Ukrainian counteroffensive into annexed Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts.[11]** After annexation, Putin may state, directly or obliquely, that Russian doctrine permitting the use of nuclear weapons to defend Russian territory applies to newly annexed territories. Such actions would threaten Ukraine and its partners with nuclear attack if Ukrainian counteroffensives to liberate Russian-occupied territory continue. Putin may believe that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would restore Russian deterrence after his disastrous invasion shattered Russia's conventional deterrent capabilities, although previous Russian hints at Moscow's willingness to use nuclear weapons have proven hollow. **Ukraine and its Western partners may have a narrowing window of opportunity to support a Ukrainian counteroffensive into occupied Ukrainian territory before the Kremlin annexes that territory.[12]**

**Russian milbloggers are increasingly openly criticizing the Russian military for failing to address structural problems with Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), highlighting the VDV's failure to fight the war as it had trained in peacetime, a failing that played no small role in the general Russian failures during the initial invasion.** Russian milblogger *Military Informant* stated that Russian VDV has not adopted force structure and tactics reforms that the Russian military already knew were necessary prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[13] *Military Informant* stated that lightly armored Russian VDV vehicles (such as BMD and BTR-D) are too heavy to enable effective

airborne mobility—especially in contested airspace—and too light to provide sufficient protection in maneuver warfare. Russian milblogger Alexander Sladkov similarly noted that Russian VDV forces’ structural reliance on a small number of lightly armored fighting vehicles is a liability.[14] *Military Informant* praised how the Russian VDV previously practiced using light unarmored vehicles for higher mobility in three consecutive years of annual capstone command staff exercises (Tsentr 2019, Kavkaz 2020, and Zapad 2021) but noted that these adaptations did not have time to “take root” before the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[15]

The Russian military’s failure to implement lessons learned—or to learn the right lessons—from previous exercises or combat is an ongoing trend that ISW has observed.[16] The most prominent example of this phenomenon was the Russian military’s failure to create a cohesive command and control system for the amalgamation of approximately 120 Russian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) assembled for the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine after experiencing successes operating smaller numbers of BTGs in Ukraine in 2014 and in Syria in 2016.[17]

#### Key Takeaways

- Calls made by Russian nationalist and pro-war voices for the Kremlin to officially define operations in Ukraine as a war, conduct general mobilization, and pursue expanded territorial goals reached a crescendo on July 19 with some criticizing the Kremlin and others claiming that Putin has been preparing for the “Syrianization” of the war all along.
- The Kremlin will likely attempt to illegally annex occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts into Russia as early as September 11, 2022.
- Russian milbloggers highlighted the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) failure to fight as they had trained—a critique that helps explain the general Russian failures during the initial invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued efforts to resume offensive operations toward Slovyansk from southeast of Izyum and around Barvinkove.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks to the east of Siversk and had partial success in ground attacks to the east of Bakhmut.
- Russian authorities are continuing to leverage unconventional sources of combat power to avoid general mobilization.
- Russian occupation authorities are escalating law enforcement measures to protect administrative control of occupied areas.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 18, 5:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu’s July 18 meeting with the commander of the Eastern group of forces Lieutenant General Rustam Muradov supports ISW’s assessment that Moscow will not prioritize an attack to seize Slovyansk in this stage of the operation but will instead focus on seizing Siversk and Bakhmut.[1] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on July 18 that Shoigu inspected the Eastern group and directed Muradov to prioritize the destruction of Ukrainian long-range missiles and artillery systems. This is the first time ISW has observed explicit mention of the Eastern force grouping operating in Ukraine in this phase of the war. The Russian MoD previously reported that the Central and Southern force groups took part in the capture of Luhansk Oblast under the leadership of Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin and Army General Sergey Surovikin. [2] The Eastern group of forces is likely comprised of elements of the Russian Eastern Military District (EMD), which have been active along the Izyum axis in Kharkiv Oblast.[3] It is still unclear whether Muradov also directly controls operations around Kharkiv City. Muradov’s forces are operating in the Izyum-Slovyansk direction ostensibly with the objective of eventually seizing Slovyansk itself, and it is noteworthy that Shoigu did not direct Muradov to prioritize taking ground along this axis at this time. Muradov holds a lower rank than both Lapin and Surovikin, suggesting that the Kremlin considers the Izyum-Slovyansk area to be a lower priority than capturing territory in Donetsk Oblast as part of the wider Donbas campaign. The Kremlin likely is focusing military resources and high-rank leadership on

localized and discrete gains around Siversk and Bakhmut, despite Shoigu's earlier calls for the intensification of operations along all axes of advance.[4]

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's likely effort to shield ethnic Russians from high levels of mobilization may trigger resistance in some of the ethnic enclaves that seem to be disproportionately bearing the burden of war.** Russian Telegram channel Rybar released a report on July 18 about the Novaya Tuva movement- an anti-war organization comprised of activists from the Tuvan ethnic minority enclave.[5] Rybar accused the Novaya Tuva movement of disseminating anti-war propaganda and inciting ethnic discord within the Russian Federation. This report is noteworthy in the context of the recent increase in the formation of regionally-based volunteer battalions through Russia, many of which fall along distinct ethnic lines.[6] ISW and others have previously noted the prevalence of non-ethnic Russian battalions fighting in Ukraine, which include troops from Chechnya, South Ossetia, Tuva, Tartarstan, Bashkortostan, Chuvashia, and others.[7] These indicators suggest that Putin may be unwilling to conduct general mobilization in part due to a reluctance to mobilize large numbers of ethnic Russians. Rybar's post as well as previous reporting on a "Free Buryatia" anti-war group bring to the fore the risk that Putin's apparent desire to have non-Russians bear the brunt of the war at this stage could create domestic tension in these regions.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense's meeting with the leadership of the Eastern grouping of forces in Ukraine suggests that the Kremlin will not focus on seizing Slovyansk at this stage of the campaign but will instead prioritize attempting to seize Siversk and Bakhmut.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's likely effort to put the burden of supporting operations in Ukraine on ethnic minorities to avoid conducting a general mobilization of ethnic Russians may be sparking resistance in ethnic enclaves in Russia.
- Russian forces conducted a series of ground attacks east of Siversk and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces intensified efforts to advance on Avdiivka and conducted limited ground assaults along the Donetsk City-Avdiivka frontline.
- Russian authorities are continuing to integrate occupied areas into the Russian trade economy.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 17, 5:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces are continuing a measured return from the operational pause and conducted limited ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on July 17.** As ISW has previously noted, the end of the Russian operational pause is unlikely to create a massive new wave of ground assaults across multiple axes of advance despite Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's public order for exactly that. Russian troops are prioritizing advances around Siversk and Bakhmut while maintaining defensive positions north of Kharkiv City and along the Southern Axis. Russian forces continued to set conditions for resumed offensives toward Slovyansk, shelled settlements along the Izyum-Slovyansk salient, and otherwise conducted artillery, missile, and air strikes throughout Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Defense notably did not claim any new territorial gains on July 17. ISW continues to forecast that the end of the operational pause will be characterized by a fluctuating and staggered resumption of ground offensives.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued a measured return from the operational pause and did not make any confirmed territorial gains on July 17.
- Russian forces continued limited ground assaults around Siversk, Bakhmut, and Donetsk City and otherwise fired at civilian and military infrastructure throughout the Donbas.

- Russian forces focused on defensive operations north of Kharkiv City and along the Southern Axis.
- The Kremlin may be setting long-term conditions for force generation efforts in anticipation of protracted hostilities in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely using the threat of partisan activities to justify harsher societal controls in occupied areas.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 16

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 16, 6 pm ET

The Russian Defense Ministry announced that the Russian operational pause has concluded on July 16, confirming ISW's July 15 assessment.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu ordered Southern Group Commander General of the Army Sergey Surovikin and Central Group Commander Colonel General Alexander Lapin to increase offensive operations on all axes on July 16, but the tempo of the resuming Russian offensive will likely fluctuate or stutter over the coming days. [2] Russian forces conducted fewer ground assaults on all axes on July 16 than on July 15, but maintained increased artillery and missile strikes on July 16.<sup>[3]</sup>

Shoigu indicated that Surovikin and Lapin will both continue to command forces on the Eastern Axis even though a force concentration and effort of this size should only require a single, very senior overall commander. Surovikin should in principle be in overall command because he outranks Lapin. Shoigu has not even named Surovikin as the head of Russia's Southern Military District (SMD) despite the likely ousting of SMD Commander General of the Army Alexander Dvornikov and despite Surovikin's experience commanding the Southern Grouping in Ukraine. Lapin, in contrast, has been and remains commander of the Central Military District.<sup>[4]</sup> The Kremlin's failure to use the operational pause to reorganize the Russian military command structure in Ukraine and its decision to instead retain an ad-hoc command structure is very odd. The apparent dual command of two very senior generals over operations in a very small area may hinder Russian operations going forward.

**Ukrainian HIMARS strikes against Russian ammunition depots, logistics elements, and command and control are likely degrading Russian artillery campaigns.** Ukrainian officials confirmed that American-supplied HIMARS arrived in Ukraine on June 23.<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian operators have been using the HIMARS to strike multiple Russian targets – notably ammunition depots – since June 25.<sup>[6]</sup> The destruction of these ammunition depots has likely degraded Russian forces' ability to sustain high volumes of artillery fire along front lines. Detected heat anomalies from NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS) remotely sensed data decreased significantly in Donbas starting around July 10.

### Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense announced the cessation of the operational pause, confirming ISW's July 15 assessment that Russian forces are likely resuming ground attacks along multiple axes of advance. The cessation of the operational pause is unlikely to lead to a massive increase in ground attacks across Ukraine but will rather likely be characterized by continued limited ground assaults focused on the Slovyansk-Siversk-Bakhmut salient.
- The Kremlin may have ordered Russian forces to take control of the entirety of Kharkiv Oblast, despite the extraordinary low likelihood of Russian success in such an effort.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground assaults around Siversk and Bakhmut and otherwise fired on Ukrainian military and civilian infrastructure across Eastern Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities likely are responding to the perceived threat of Ukrainian partisan activities by strengthening administrative regimes in occupied areas.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 15, 7:25 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces are likely emerging from their operational pause as of July 15.** Russian forces carried out a series of limited ground assaults northwest of Slovyansk, southeast of Siversk, along the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway, southeast of Bakhmut, and southwest of Donetsk City.<sup>[1]</sup> These assaults may indicate that Russian forces are attempting to resume their offensive operations in Donbas. The assaults are still small-scale and were largely unsuccessful. If the operational pause is truly over, the Russians will likely continue and expand such assaults in the coming 72 hours. The Russians might instead alternate briefer pauses with strengthening attacks over a number of days before moving into a full-scale offensive operation. A 10-day-long operational pause is insufficient to fully regenerate Russian forces for large-scale offensive operations. The Russian military seems to feel continuous pressure to resume and continue offensive operations before it can reasonably have rebuilt sufficient combat power to achieve decisive effects at a reasonable cost to itself, however. The resuming Russian offensive may therefore fluctuate or even stall for some time.

**Ukrainian HIMARS strikes have likely killed or wounded four Russian 106th Airborne Division deputy commanders.** Russian news outlets reported the deaths of 106th Division's deputy commanders Colonel Sergey Kuzminov, Colonel Andrey Vasiliev, and Colonel Maxim Kudrin, seemingly confirming Ukrainian claims that HIMARS strikes on Shaktarsk on July 9 killed or wounded a significant portion of the 106th's leadership.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications claimed on July 12 that one unspecified 106th Airborne Division deputy commander remains in critical condition.<sup>[3]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are likely emerging from their operational pause, launching ground assaults north of Slovyansk, southeast of Siversk, around Bakhmut, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued to defend occupied positions in the Kharkiv City direction to prevent Ukrainian forces from advancing toward the Russian border in Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian forces continued their systematic attacks on civilian infrastructure targeting residential infrastructure, recreational facilities, and educational institutions in Mykolaiv City on July 15.
- Chelyabinsk Oblast officials announced the completion of a volunteer battalion on July 15.
- Russian occupation authorities continued to institute new societal control measures in occupied territories.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 14, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russia's operational pause largely continued, with limited Russian ground assaults along the Slovyansk-Siversk-Bakhmut salient.** Russian forces continued heavy shelling, missile attacks, and airstrikes all along the front line. The Russians will likely launch a larger-scale and more determined offensive along the Slovyansk-Siversk-Bakhmut line soon, but there are no indications yet of how soon that attack will begin or exactly where it will focus.

**The Russian missile strike on Vinnytsia on July 14 was part of a systematic Russian campaign of attacks on residential areas of cities in Ukraine.**<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian President's Office Deputy Head Kyrylo Tymoshenko reported that Russian forces launched Kalibr missiles from a submarine at the Vinnytsia city center.<sup>[2]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff stated that the strike resulted in at least 22 civilian deaths, about 100 injured, and 39 missing people.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces also launched missiles at a hotel, educational facilities, a shopping center, and transport infrastructure in Mykolaiv city.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Key Takeaways

- Russia continued its campaign of systematic attacks on residential areas in Ukrainian cities with strikes on Vinnytsia, Kharkiv City, and Mykolaiv City.
- Russian forces continued efforts to advance on Siversk but their progress is unclear.
- Russian troops conducted limited ground assaults around Bakhmut and Sloviansk but made no gains.
- Chechen Leader Ramazan Kadyrov claimed that one of the four new battalions he has been forming deployed to Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 13, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin likely ordered Russian “federal subjects” (regions) to form volunteer battalions to participate in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, instead of declaring partial or full mobilization in Russia. Russian war correspondent and milblogger Maksim Fomin stated that Russia has begun a “volunteer mobilization,” where every region must generate at least one volunteer battalion.[1] The term “volunteer mobilization” likely implies that the Kremlin ordered the 85 “federal subjects” (regions, including occupied Sevastopol and Crimea) to recruit and financially incentivize volunteers to form new battalions, rather than referring to literal mobilization relying on conscription or the compulsory activation of all reservists in Russia. Russian outlets reported that regional officials recruit men up to 50 years old (or 60 for separate military specialties) for six-month contracts and offer salaries averaging 220,000 to 350,000 rubles per month (approximately \$3,750 to \$6,000).[2] Separate regions offer an immediate enlistment bonus that averages 200,000 rubles (approximately \$3,400) issued from the region’s budget and social benefits for the servicemen and their families.[3] Russian media has already confirmed the creation or deployment of volunteer battalions in Kursk, Primorsky Krai, Republic of Bashkortostan, Chuvashia Republic, Chechnya, Republic of Tatarstan, Moscow City, Perm, Nizhny Novgorod, and Orenburg Oblasts in late June and early July.[4] Tyumen Oblast officials announced the formation of volunteer units (not specifically a battalion) on July 7.[5]

**Volunteer battalions could generate around 34,000 new servicemen by the end of August if each federal subject produces at least one military unit of 400 men.** Some Russian reports and documentation suggest that the Kremlin seeks to recruit an estimated 400 soldiers per battalion, who will receive a month of training before deploying to Ukraine.[6] The number of men may vary as some federal subjects such as Republic of Tatarstan and Chechnya are establishing two and four volunteer battalions, respectively.[7] It is possible that some federal subjects may delay or not participate in the establishment of the battalions, with officials in Volgograd reportedly remaining silent on the formation of the new units.[8] Newly formed battalions are currently departing to training grounds and will likely complete their month-long training by end of August but they will not be combat ready in such a short time period.[9]

**Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian military on July 12 for sourcing Iranian UAVs to improve artillery targeting in Ukraine while failing to address the command issues that more severely limit the effectiveness of Russian artillery.** Russian Telegram channel Rybar claimed on July 12 that Russian requests and approval for artillery fire pass through a convoluted chain of command, resulting in a delay of several hours to several days between Russian ground forces requesting artillery fire, Russian targeting, and conducting the actual strikes.[10] Rybar claimed that Russian forces in Syria reduced the time between targeting and striking to under an hour.[11] Rybar claimed that while the Russian need for more UAVs is clear and that Iranian UAVs helped achieve a target-to-fire time of 40 minutes in Syrian training grounds additional UAVs do not solve the problems of overcentralized Russian command and overreliance on artillery in Ukraine.[12] Russian milblogger *Voyennyi Osvedomitel’* claimed that Russian forces had faced the same overcentralized command during the First Chechen War, wherein the inability of Russian ground forces to request artillery support without going through a chain of command inhibited responses to enemy offensive actions.[13] Milblogger *Yuzhnyi Veter* claimed that Ukrainian artillery forces’ target-to-response time is under 40 seconds.[14]

The Critical Threats Project at AEI has updated its datasheet on Iranian UAVs with additional information, including information on the kinds of munitions those UAVs can reportedly launch.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin likely ordered Russian “federal subjects” (regions) to form volunteer battalions to deploy to Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted failed ground assaults north of Slovyansk and around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued air and artillery strikes around Siversk and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued targeting Ukrainian rail lines on the Eastern Axis.
- Russian forces attempted limited and unsuccessful ground assaults north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces prioritized defensive operations on the Southern Axis as Ukrainian forces continued targeting ammunition depots.
- Russian occupation authorities are increasing financial incentives for civilians working in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities may be setting conditions to forcibly relocate Ukrainian children in occupied territories to Crimea.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 12, 8:10 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces remain in a theater-wide operational pause in Ukraine.** Russian forces continue to regroup, rest, refit, and reconstitute; bombard critical areas to set conditions for future ground offensives; and conduct limited probing attacks. The Russian Ministry of Defense did not claim any new territorial control on July 12.[1] ISW has previously noted that an operational pause does not mean a cessation of attacks.[2] Current Russian offensive actions are likely meant to prepare for future offensives, the timing of which remains unclear.

**White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan reported on July 11 that Iran will provide Russia with “up to several hundred UAVs” on an expedited timeline.[3]** Sullivan did not specify the kinds of drones Iran will be supplying. AEI’s Critical Threats Project has provided a quick summary of the basic kinds and capabilities of Iranian drones. Sullivan noted that Iran will also provide weapons-capable UAVs and train Russian forces to use Iranian drones as early as July. Russian milbloggers and war correspondents have long criticized the Kremlin for ineffective aerial reconnaissance and artillery fire correction measures due to the lack of UAVs. Former Russian military commander and milblogger Igor Girkin stated that Ukrainian forces have successfully defended the Donetsk Oblast frontline due to the advantage of Ukrainian UAV capabilities in the area.[4] Russian milblogger Andrey Morozov (also known as Boytsevoi Kot Murz) blamed Russian state media for grossly misrepresenting the availability of Russian UAVs and their ability to support accurate artillery fire.[5] Russian frontline correspondent Alexander Sladkov also complained that Russian forces can build more drones but have not done so.[6]

#### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin is reportedly sourcing Iranian UAVs likely to improve Russian aerial reconnaissance and indirect fire accuracy in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted limited and unsuccessful ground assaults north of Slovyansk and east of Siversk.
- Russian forces continued air and artillery strikes around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian forces conducted multiple unsuccessful ground assaults north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces likely conducted a false-flag attack on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in occupied Enerhodar, Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian strikes killed multiple Russian officers in Kherson City on July 10.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian ammunition depots on the Southern Axis.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 11

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 11, 7:10 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is likely continuing to grant Russian forces access to Belarusian airspace to demonstrate at least nominal support to Russian President Vladimir Putin without risking direct military involvement of Belarusian Armed Forces in operations in Ukraine. Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff Oleksiy Gromov previously reported on July 7 that the Belarusian government transferred use of the Pribytki airfield in Gomel Oblast to Russia.<sup>[1]</sup> Independent Belarusian monitoring organization The Hajun Project similarly reported on July 11 that a Russian Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft flew into Belarusian airspace for the first time since April 4.<sup>[2]</sup> The Hajun Project noted that the Belarusian government introduced new airspace restrictions along the border with Ukraine where the AWACS aircraft patrolled between July 10 and 11.<sup>[3]</sup> Taken together, these data points likely indicate that Lukashenko is attempting to provide support to Putin's war in Ukraine short of direct Belarusian military intervention in an effort to respond to the pressure Putin is likely putting on him. As ISW has previously assessed, the likelihood of direct Belarusian involvement in the war in Ukraine remains low due to the effect that might have on the stability and even survival of Lukashenko's regime.<sup>[4]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is likely continuing to allow Russia access to Belarusian airspace to indicate support to Russian President Vladimir Putin without risking the consequences of direct Belarusian military involvement in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted limited and unsuccessful ground assaults northwest of Sloviansk and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued air and artillery strikes around Siversk and Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted localized ground assaults northwest of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces continued to focus on defensive operations along the entire Southern Axis.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 10

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 10, 8:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces are in the midst of a theater-wide operational pause in Ukraine. This operational pause has been largely characterized by Russian troops regrouping to rest, refit, and reconstitute; heavy artillery fire in critical areas to set conditions for future ground advances; and limited probing attacks to identify Ukrainian weakness and structure appropriate tactical responses. As ISW has previously noted, an operational pause does not mean a complete cessation of hostilities, rather that ongoing hostilities are more preparative in nature.<sup>[1]</sup>

**Russian milblogger Rybar provided more evidence of tensions between the Russian military command and Russian war correspondents.**<sup>[2]</sup> Russian war correspondents include journalists operating at the frontlines and Russian milbloggers commenting on information available in the open-source (and likely also drawn from friends in the military). Rybar noted that Russian military commanders responsible for wartime information operations are attempting to silence Russian milbloggers and war correspondents to conceal the Russian military's blunders during the invasion of Ukraine. Rybar noted that Russian military commanders remain shaped by negative experiences during the Chechnya wars when war correspondents exposed problems at the frontline to the Kremlin and embarrassed Russian officers.

**Rybar stated that the Russian Defense Ministry and possibly actors within the presidential administration are actively attempting to silence unofficial coverage of the Russian war in Ukraine.** Rybar expressed support for a Telegram article by Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Deputy Information Minister (and milblogger) Daniil Bezzonov that criticized the Kremlin's apparent effort to promote self-censorship among war correspondents.<sup>[3]</sup> Rybar noted that Adviser to the Russian Defense Minister Andrey Illyitsky called for such self-censorship on May 26 and had encouraged Russian war correspondents to report on the war only from an ideological standpoint without getting into operational details.<sup>[4]</sup> Rybar speculated that the presidential administration or other Russian officials ordered Illyitsky to promote censorship among war correspondents who publish frontline updates in real-time.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Rybar noted that the relationship between the Russian military command and war correspondents particularly soured after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with war correspondents during the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on June 17.** Rybar claimed that two prominent war correspondents told Putin about the "mess" at the frontlines during the closed-door meeting, effectively bypassing the Russian Defense Ministry in presenting their negative views directly to the commander in chief. The event Rybar is describing likely occurred: Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced on June 12 that Putin would hold a largely closed-door meeting with Russian war correspondents, and Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan confirmed that Putin had a "candid" and long conversation with frontline journalists after the event.<sup>[6]</sup> Rybar noted that Russian Defense Ministry began to identify war correspondents as a "threat" after this engagement whereas previously it had perceived them as a "poorly controlled problem."

**Putin likely held the June 17 meeting to defuse milblogger discontent, which had become evident and dramatic after the disastrous failed river crossing attempt at Bilohorivka in mid-May.** If that was his aim, he failed to win them over, as the milbloggers have remained staunchly critical of the way the Russian high command is waging the war ever since. But Putin may also have obtained a more unvarnished view of what is occurring on the frontlines than he was getting from the chain of command.

**The Russian information space would change significantly if the Ministry of Defense cracked down on the milbloggers and stopped them from operational reporting.** ISW uses milbloggers and Russian war correspondents as sources of Russian claims on a daily basis, so the elimination of regular milblogger operational reporting would affect ISW's approach to coverage. **We will continue to observe and report on milblogger and war correspondent behavior and will flag significant changes in the Russian information space as we observe them.**

**Russian milbloggers are increasingly criticizing Russian strategy and military leadership by seizing upon recent successful Ukrainian strikes against Russian rear areas.**<sup>[7]</sup> Russian milblogger *Voenny Osvedomitel'* underlined the threat posed by Western-provided high mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) and stated that HIMARS will complicate Russian logistics in a Telegram post on July 9.<sup>[8]</sup> *Voenny Osvedomitel'* cautioned that Russian air defense may be increasingly insufficient against Ukrainian strikes and called on Russian forces to improve coordination between intelligence and aviation in order to identify and target Western-provided weapons systems. Another milblogger with a small following, *Nam Pishut iz Yaniny*, complained that Russian military leadership is proving unable to defend against Western weapons being used against Russian positions.<sup>[9]</sup> Igor Girkin, a Russian nationalist who previously commanded militants during operations in Donbas in 2014, discussed recent Ukrainian strikes against Russian rear areas and criticized Russian troops for not targeting Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) along which HIMARS and other Western weapons are delivered.<sup>[10]</sup> Girkin suggested that the ongoing operational pause is exposing easily-exploitable Russian vulnerabilities and called for Russian troops to start fighting in full force again. Girkin and other milbloggers are likely to continue voicing their discontent with Russian military leadership as Ukrainian capabilities are strengthened by Western weaponry and equipment.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces are conducting a theater-wide operational pause in Ukraine and engaging in operations to set conditions for future offensives.
- Russian forces conducted limited probing operations northwest of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces are likely intensifying artillery and missile strikes west of Bakhmut in order to isolate the city from critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs).
- Russian forces conducted a limited and unsuccessful ground attack north of Donetsk City.
- Russian military leadership continues to form ad hoc volunteer units and private military company combat organizations partly comprised of older men and criminals to support operations in Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 9

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 9, 6:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian-backed occupation authorities in Kharkiv Oblast stated that Kharkiv Oblast is an “inalienable part of Russian land,” indicating that the Kremlin likely intends to annex part or all of Kharkiv Oblast.**<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian occupation government in Kharkiv Oblast unveiled a new flag for the occupation regime in Kharkiv Oblast containing the Russian imperial double-headed eagle and symbols from the 18th century Kharkiv coat of arms.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian occupation government stated that the imagery in the flag is a “symbol of the historical roots of Kharkiv Oblast as an inalienable part of Russian land,” indicating that the Kremlin seeks to annex portions of Kharkiv Oblast to Russia and likely seeks to capture all of Kharkiv Oblast if it can.<sup>[3]</sup> The Kharkiv Oblast occupation government’s speed in establishing a civilian administration on July 6 and introducing martial law in occupied Kharkiv Oblast on July 8 further indicates that the Kremlin is aggressively pursuing the legitimization and consolidation of the Kharkiv Oblast occupation administration’s power to support this broader territorial aim.<sup>[4]</sup> The Kharkiv Oblast occupation government’s explicit use of Imperial Russian imagery and rhetoric pointing clearly at annexation, rather than using imagery and rhetoric supporting the establishment of a “people’s republic,” reinforces ISW’s prior assessment that the Kremlin has broader territorial aims than capturing Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts or even holding southern Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The Kremlin has likely used a leaked letter from mothers demanding the ban of journalist activity on the frontlines to promote self-censorship among pro-Russian milbloggers and war correspondents.** Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* released a letter from mothers of an Astrakhan-based platoon that blamed Kremlin-sponsored *Izvestia* war correspondent Valentin Trushnin for reporting the details of Russian positions in a way that led to the deaths of their sons.<sup>[6]</sup> *Meduza* removed the letter from its website on July 8. First Deputy of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Information Minister and milblogger Daniil Bezsonov reported noticing suggestions from unspecified “faceless experts” to censor his posts regarding Russian war efforts.<sup>[7]</sup> Bezsonov noted that Russian war correspondents received necessary accreditations from the Kremlin and follow protocol when reporting from the frontline to refrain from exposing Russian positions. Bezsonov also argued that Russian war correspondents took the initiative to keep Russians updated on the situation on the front line from the first days of the war, while Russian “big bosses” failed to launch an information campaign to counter claimed Ukrainian information warfare. Several Russian milbloggers shared Bezsonov’s remarks, with proxy serviceman Maksim Fomin stating that Russian Defense Ministry briefings are not sufficient to replace combat footage.<sup>[8]</sup>

**The Kremlin faces challenges directly censoring pro-Russian milbloggers and war correspondents but will likely continue to look for opportunities to promote self-censorship.** Moscow has not demonstrated the ability to compel Telegram to delete or control the content of channels, and so would likely have to threaten individual milbloggers with legal or extra-legal action to stop them from publishing on that platform. Russia could prevent war correspondents publishing in regular media outlets from writing stories or deprive them of access to the front lines. But both the milbloggers and the war correspondents are explicitly pro-war and patriotic, often ultra-nationalist, with large followings likely concentrated among Russian President Vladimir Putin’s key supporters. Threatening or suppressing them directly could backfire if Putin’s motivation in doing so is to stop them from undermining support for the war or questioning authority. Actions such as the use of

this leaked and possibly faked letter to stoke self-censorship or induce pressure from the readers of these blogs and articles toward self-censorship may be an effort to achieve the Kremlin's desired effects without the risk of having them backfire.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to launch unsuccessful assaults northwest of Slovyansk and conducted offensive operations east of Siversk from the Lysychansk area.
- Russian forces continued localized attacks northwest of Kharkiv City, likely in an effort to defend Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in the area.
- Russian forces continue to face personnel and equipment shortages, relying on old armored personnel carriers and launching new recruitment campaigns.
- Russian forces continued to set conditions for the annexation of Donbas, Kharkiv Oblast, and southern Ukraine.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros

July 8, 7:00 pm ET

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Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Russian forces are not conducting an operational pause as of July 8 and are continuing to shell settlements and deploy additional tank units to Donbas.<sup>[1]</sup> Haidai's statement likely reflects confusion about the meaning of the expression "operational pause" and how such a "pause" actually manifests on the ground in a war. US military doctrine considers the role of operational pauses in warfighting and campaigning in some detail.<sup>[2]</sup> It notes that "Normally, operational pauses are planned to regenerate combat power or augment sustainment and forces for the next phase." It observes that "The primary drawback to operational pauses is the risk of forfeiting strategic or operational initiative." It therefore recommends that "If pauses are necessary, the [commander] can alternate pauses among components to ensure continuous pressure on the enemy or adversary through offensive actions by some components while other components pause." Soviet military theory regarded operational pauses in a similar fashion—sometimes necessary, but always dangerous.

The Russian military command, which announced an operational pause on July 7, has apparently recognized the need for a pause given the state of Russian forces at this point in the campaign. The Russian troops that have completed the seizure of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk are clearly in need of regenerating combat power and building up supporting capabilities, including supply, before launching another large-scale offensive operation. Numerous reports from various sources show that they are engaged in both activities. They have naturally and necessarily ceased efforts to conduct large-scale offensive operations in this sector while they reorganized, reinforce, and resupply their tired troops—in other words, they are in an operational pause in this sector.

Recognizing the danger of allowing the Ukrainians to seize the initiative and go over to an offensive of their own, however, Russian forces continue to conduct more-limited offensive operations in this sector and elsewhere along the front line. Those operations involve smaller Russian forces than had been involved in the attacks on Severodonetsk and Lysychansk pursuing more limited and localized objectives with less determination and willingness to take casualties compared with their behavior during the fights for the two cities. When the Russian military command has determined that it has adequately prepared for a renewed major offensive operation, it will likely resume larger-scale ground offensives with more troops and a greater determination than it is currently showing. The transition out of the operational pause may be gradual and difficult to discern at once, just as the transition into it appeared gradual. Skillful campaign design aims to achieve precisely such an effect in order to persuade the enemy that no pause is contemplated or underway, or that it will be too short to be of benefit to the enemy, and thereby convince the enemy that it does not have the opportunity to seize the initiative and go over to a counter-offensive of its own. Russian campaign design, inadequate as it has generally been, is nevertheless good enough to manifest this basic principle of operational art.

Russian milbloggers are continuing to show rhetorical opposition to the Kremlin by faulting the Russian Defense Ministry for making Russian logistics vulnerable to the Ukrainian strikes via US-provided HIMARS rocket systems. Russian milbloggers are notably criticizing the Russian military command instead of expressing patriotic hatred toward Western suppliers of HIMARS as one would have expected of the ultra-nationalist, pro-war Telegram channels. Former Russian military commander Igor Girkin, an outspoken Russian nationalist who commanded militants during the Donbas war in 2014, stated that personnel of the Russian Defense Ministry's logistics department should be tried for failing to disperse and camouflage ammunition depots.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian milbloggers Starshe Eddy and Russian officer Aleksey Suronkin echoed similar concerns over the effectiveness of HIMARS, calling on Russian forces to adapt to new threats and strike back against Ukrainian forces.<sup>[4]</sup> The continued trend of patriotic and pro-war Russian milbloggers blaming the Kremlin by default for setbacks and problems in the war may begin to create in effect a loyal opposition that could ultimately erode confidence in the milbloggers' significant audience in Russia's ability to win.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to conduct limited offensive operations north of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces continued attempting to advance toward Siversk from Lysychansk but did not make any confirmed territorial gains.
- Russian forces launched assaults on Dementiivka to disrupt Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) along the T2117 highway.
- Russian forces continued to launch assaults on settlements along the Kherson-Mykolaiv and Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border to regain lost positions.
- Russian Federation Council approved a bill committing the Kremlin to paying veteran benefits to civilians involved in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities continued to set conditions for the annexation of Donbas and southern Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 7, 5:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian Defense Ministry Spokesperson Igor Konashenkov announced on July 7 that Russian forces in Ukraine are pausing to rest and regain their combat capabilities, confirming ISW's assessment that Russian forces have initiated an operational pause.<sup>[1]</sup> Konashenkov did not specify the intended length of Russian forces' operational pause. As ISW previously assessed, Russian forces have not ceased active hostilities during this operational pause and are unlikely to do so.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces still conducted limited ground offensives and air, artillery, and missile strikes across all axes on July 7.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces will likely continue to confine themselves to small-scale offensive actions as they rebuild forces and set conditions for a more significant offensive in the coming weeks or months.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense announced that Russian forces are conducting an operational pause to rest and reconstitute.
- Russian forces continued efforts to advance toward Slovyansk from the southeast of Izum and may be setting conditions to advance from the southeast of Barvinkove—either toward Slovyansk or toward Kramatorsk.
- Russian forces made marginal gains to the southeast of Siversk and continued offensive operations west of the Lysychansk area.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations to the south and east of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted a limited and unsuccessful attack north of Kharkiv City.
- Ukrainian partisans are likely continuing to target Russian-controlled railways around Melitopol.

- Russian oblasts are continuing to create their own ad hoc volunteer units to compensate for personnel losses in Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 6, 6:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

There were no claimed or assessed Russian territorial gains in Ukraine on July 6 for the first time in 133 days of war, supporting ISW's assessment that Russian forces have largely initiated an operational pause.<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian Defense Ministry claimed territorial gains every day from the start of the war but has not claimed any new territory or ground force movements since completing the encirclement of Lysychansk on July 3.<sup>[2]</sup> However, Russian forces still conducted limited and unsuccessful ground assaults across all axes on July 6.<sup>[3]</sup> Such attempts are consistent with a Russian operational pause, which does not imply or require the complete cessation of active hostilities. It means, in this case, that Russian forces will likely confine themselves to relatively small-scale offensive actions as they attempt to set conditions for more significant offensive operations and rebuild the combat power needed to attempt those more ambitious undertakings.

The Kremlin continued to set conditions for the crypto-mobilization of the Russian economy in anticipation of protracted operations in Ukraine. The Russian State Duma adopted the third and final reading of a law introduced by the cabinet of ministers on June 30 that will allow the Russian government to oversee and regulate labor relations in Russian enterprises (both state and privately-owned).<sup>[4]</sup> This law, as ISW has previously reported, will allow government officials to recall workers from personal vacations, reschedule time off without employee consent, and require employees to work weekends, holidays, and nights. These measures allow the Kremlin to take much more direct control of most aspects of the Russian economy, including suspending rights and protections some workers would normally have.<sup>[5]</sup> The law must still be sent to the Federation Council before it reaches Russian President Vladimir Putin and is officially published, but the Kremlin is likely seeking to use the law to leverage domestic labor to maximize economic output and prepare for protracted operations in Ukraine.<sup>[6]</sup> Russia's largest lead production plant reportedly stopped production on July 6 due to the almost-total halt of Russian metallurgical exports, and the Kremlin will likely continue to take measures to codify economic mobilization to offset or mitigate the effects of sanctions and the war on essential industries.<sup>[7]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense has not claimed any territorial gains since July 3, supporting the assessment that Russian forces are conducting an operational pause while still engaging in limited ground attacks to set conditions for more significant offensive operations.
- The Kremlin continues to prepare for a protracted war by setting conditions for crypto-mobilization of the economy and largely initiating an operational pause in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations northwest and east of Sloviansk.
- Russian forces continued efforts to push westward toward Siversk from the Luhansk-Donetsk oblast border.
- Russian forces continued attempts to advance toward Bakhmut from the south.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground assaults in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces may be setting conditions for a counteroffensive toward Kherson City.
- Russian forces may be forming a new military unit in Mulino, Nizhny Novgorod Oblast.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 5

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 5, 7:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russia's stated objectives in its invasion of Ukraine remain regime change in Kyiv and the truncation of the sovereignty of any Ukrainian state that survives the Russian attack despite Russian military setbacks and rhetoric hinting at a reduction in war aims following those defeats. Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev stated on July 5 that the Russian military operation in Ukraine will continue until Russia achieves its goals of protecting civilians from "genocide," "denazifying" and demilitarizing Ukraine, and obliging Ukraine to be permanently neutral between Russia and NATO—almost exactly restating the goals Russian President Vladimir Putin announced in his February 24 speech justifying the war.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin had stated that the operation aimed to protect civilians from humiliation and genocide, demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, and prosecute genocidal perpetrators.<sup>[2]</sup> Patrushev's explicit restatement of Putin's initial objectives, nearly five months later, strongly indicates that the Kremlin does not consider recent Russian gains in Luhansk Oblast sufficient to accomplish the initial goals of the "special operation," supporting ISW's ongoing assessment that the Kremlin has significant territorial aspirations beyond the Donbas. Patrushev's statement suggests that Russian military leadership will continue to push for advances outside Donetsk and Luhansk blasts and that the Kremlin is preparing for a protracted war with the intention of taking much larger portions of Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Patrushev's statement is noteworthy because of its timing and his position as a close confidante of Putin.** Patrushev is very unlikely to stray far from Putin's position in his public comments given his relationship with Putin and his role in the Kremlin. His restatement of virtually the same maximalist objectives that Putin laid out before the invasion even as Russian forces seemed to be closing in on the more limited objectives of securing Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts—which Putin and other Russian leaders had hinted were their new aims following their defeats around Kyiv—strongly suggests that those hints did not reflect any actual change in Kremlin policy. Patrushev's statement significantly increases the burden on those who suggest that some compromise ceasefire or even peace based on limited additional Russian territorial gains is possible, even if it were acceptable to Ukraine or desirable for the West (neither of which is the case).

**Igor Girkin, a Russian nationalist and former commander of militants in the 2014 war in Donbas, responded to Patrushev's statements and continued expressing his general disillusionment with the Kremlin's official line on operations in Ukraine.** Girkin said that the intended goals of "denazification" and "de-militarization" will only be possible with the total defeat of the Ukrainian military and the surrender of the Ukrainian government.<sup>[4]</sup> Girkin noted that Russian victory is premised on the capture of "Novorossiya"—a notional territory that encompasses eight Ukrainian oblasts, including the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and much of eastern and southern Ukraine. Girkin also claimed that the capture of "Novorossiya" is the bare minimum and that Russian goals will be realized through the total capture of "Malorossiya," which is an invocation of the Russian imperial concept for almost all Ukrainian territory. Girkin is once again pushing back on the Kremlin line, which he views as insufficient in securing Russian objectives in Ukraine. Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Ambassador to Russia Rodion Miroshnik similarly suggested that the Kremlin has not yet met its goals in Ukraine, despite reaching the borders of his claimed oblast, and stated that LNR authorities are still not confident in the security of the LNR.<sup>[5]</sup> Girkin and Miroshnik's statements, taken together, indicate that Russian nationalists continue to push for further territorial gains and, at least in Girkin's case, full-scale regime change and the incorporation of most of Ukraine into Russia. Patrushev's statement suggests that Kremlin thinking may not be that far removed from these extremist nationalist ambitions.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev restated Russian President Vladimir Putin's initial objectives for operations in Ukraine, suggesting that the Kremlin retains maximalist objectives including regime change and territorial expansion far beyond the Donbas.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations northwest and east of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces are attempting to advance west of the Lysychansk area toward Siversk.
- Russian forces are likely attempting to gain access to village roads southeast of Bakhmut in order to advance on the city from the south.

- Ukrainian forces conducted a limited counterattack southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued limited and unsuccessful assaults in northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian authorities are conducting escalated conscription measures in occupied territories to compensate for continuing manpower losses.
- Russian authorities are continuing to consolidate administrative control of occupied areas of Ukraine, likely to set conditions for the direct annexation of these territories to the Russian Federation.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 4, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin celebrated the Russian seizure of Lysychansk and the Luhansk Oblast border and appeared to direct the Russian military to conduct an operational pause.** Putin met with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu on July 4 to discuss recent Russian gains in Luhansk Oblast and presented Colonel General Alexander Lapin and Major General Esedulla Abachev with the “Hero of Russia” award for their leadership during the Lysychansk operation.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin and Shoigu presented the capture of Lysychansk and Luhansk Oblast as a major victory for Russian forces in Ukraine. Putin also stated that the Russian units that participated in the battle for Lysychansk should rest to increase their combat capabilities.<sup>[2]</sup> Putin’s public comment was likely meant to signal his concern for the welfare of his troops in the face of periodic complaints in Russia about the treatment of Russian soldiers. His comment was also likely accurate—Russian troops that fought through Severodonetsk and Lysychansk very likely do need a significant period in which to rest and refit before resuming large-scale offensive operations. It is not clear, however, that the Russian military will accept the risks of a long enough operational pause to allow these likely exhausted forces to regain their strength.

Former Russian military commander Igor Girkin, an ardent Russian nationalist who commanded militants during the 2014 war in Donbas, posted a scathing critique of the Kremlin’s handling of the war on his Telegram channel and questioned the significance of the seizure of Lysychansk. He suggested that Russian forces had paid too high a price for a limited gain. In a series of Telegram posts published prior to Putin’s meeting with Shoigu on July 4, Girkin complained that Russian forces have failed to meet the announced goals of the “second stage of the special operation” (the operations in eastern Ukraine following Russia’s retreat from Kyiv) to his nearly 400,000 subscribers.<sup>[3]</sup> Girkin noted that the Ukrainian defense of Lysychansk was deliberately designed to inflict maximum damage on Russian troops and burn through Russian manpower and equipment. He strongly suggested that accepting battle on the Ukrainians’ terms was a significant misstep by the Russian leadership.<sup>[4]</sup> Girkin stated (before Putin’s remarks were made public) that Russian troops need time to rest and replenish in order to recover their offensive potential and noted that the lack of individual soldier replacements and unit rotations is severely degrading morale. He warned, however, that taking time to reconstitute offensive capability would allow Ukrainian troops to seize the initiative and further threaten Russian gains.<sup>[5]</sup> Girkin additionally claimed that Russian forces have limited prospects of advancing elsewhere in Ukraine due to Ukrainian personnel and equipment superiority.<sup>[6]</sup>

Girkin’s critique is a noteworthy example of the way Russian milbloggers and military enthusiasts have become disillusioned with the Kremlin’s handling and execution of operations in Ukraine, particularly after the dramatic failed river crossing attempt at Bilohorivka in early May.<sup>[7]</sup> Girkin’s statements directly undermine the Kremlin’s efforts to frame Lysychansk as a significant victory or turning point and show that the disillusionment amongst ultra-nationalist elements in the Russian information space continues to run deep. Girkin’s assessment of Russian military failures notably aligns with much of ISW’s (and other Western agencies’ and experts’) analysis, suggesting that he and some other milbloggers continue to make and publish assessments of the situation and forecasts independent of the Kremlin line. Girkin likely hopes to use his status as a prominent former participant in the war in Donbas in 2014 to persuade Putin to take certain measures to secure Russian success in a war that Girkin still thinks is justified and necessary—specifically mobilizing the Russian population for war on a much larger scale.<sup>[8]</sup> Girkin, along with other members of the Russian nationalist milblogger space,

will likely continue to offer critiques of the Kremlin's line on operations in Ukraine to advocate for general mobilization and more competent Russian military leadership.

**Ukrainian forces are increasingly targeting Russian military infrastructure with indirect fire and US-provided HIMARS systems deep in occupied territory.** Ukrainian forces reportedly struck Russian ammunition depots in Dibrivne, Kharkiv Oblast, (close to the frontline) on July 4 and Snizhne, Donetsk Oblast, (approximately 75 km from the frontlines) overnight on July 3-4 following a strike on one of four Russian ammunition depots in Melitopol on July 3.<sup>[9]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff also published a video on July 4 of a Ukrainian HIMARS (high mobility artillery rocket system) operating in an unspecified area of Zaporizhia Oblast.<sup>[10]</sup> The increased ability of Ukrainian forces to target critical Russian military facilities with Western-provided HIMARS demonstrates how Western military aid provides Ukraine with new and necessary military capabilities.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian leadership may be setting conditions for an operational pause following the seizure of Lysychansk and the Luhansk Oblast boundary.
- Russian forces are consolidating territorial and administrative control over Severodonetsk and Lysychansk.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations to the east of Bakhmut to prepare for advances on Bakhmut and Siversk.
- Russian forces continued limited and unsuccessful assaults north of Kharkiv City.
- Ukrainian partisan activity is targeting Russian railway lines around Melitopol and Tokmak.
- Russian leadership may be setting conditions for the conscription of Ukrainian citizens living in occupied territories.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 3

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 3, 7:45 pm ET

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Russian forces have likely secured the Luhansk Oblast border, although pockets of Ukrainian resistance may remain in and around Lysychansk. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that Russian forces have captured Luhansk Oblast on July 3, after seizing Lysychansk and settlements on the Luhansk Oblast administrative border.<sup>[1]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff also announced that Ukrainian forces withdrew from Lysychansk to avoid personnel losses.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces have likely not fully cleared Lysychansk and Luhansk Oblast as of July 3, despite Shoigu's announcement. The Russian Defense Ministry stated that Russian forces are still fighting within Lysychansk to defeat remaining encircled Ukrainian forces, but the Ukrainian withdrawal means that Russian forces will almost certainly complete their clearing operations relatively quickly.<sup>[3]</sup>

Russian forces will likely next advance on Siversk, though they could launch more significant attacks on Bakhmut or Sloviansk instead or at the same time. Ukrainian forces will likely continue their fighting withdrawal toward the E40 highway that runs from Sloviansk through Bakhmut toward Debaltseve. It is unclear whether they will choose to defend around Siversk at this time.

Two very senior Russian commanders are reportedly responsible for the tactical activities around Lysychansk. Commander of the Central Military District Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin and Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces Army General Sergey Suvorikin (who also commands Russia's "southern" group of troops in Ukraine) have been responsible for securing Lysychansk and the area to the west of it respectively.<sup>[4]</sup> The involvement of two such senior officers in the same undertaking in a small part of the front is remarkable and likely indicates the significance that Russian President Vladimir Putin has attributed to securing Lysychansk and the Luhansk Oblast border as well as his lack of confidence in more junior officers to do the job.

Ukrainian forces likely used US-provided HIMARS rocket artillery systems to strike a Russian ammunition depot at the Melitopol airfield on July 3. Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov reported that Ukrainian forces launched two strikes on one of the four Russian depots in Melitopol.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian Telegram channel Rybar released footage of a large cloud of smoke over the city, and Russian-appointed Melitopol Governor Yevhen Balytskyi falsely claimed that Ukrainian forces aimed to strike residential buildings, but instead hit areas around the airfield.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Kremlin likely seeks to expand Russian state control over private Russian companies that support elements of Russia's military industrial base. The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on July 3 that the Russian government's inability to pay Russian firms supporting Russia's war in Ukraine is degrading Russia's ability to repair damaged vehicles. The GUR reported that the directors of Russian military vehicle repair centers are not accepting new Russian equipment for repair because the Russian military has not paid these centers for previous work.<sup>[7]</sup> Recently proposed Russian legislation suggests that Kremlin leadership shares GUR's assessment. Russian legislators in the Russian State Duma submitted a bill on June 30 that would empower the Kremlin to introduce "special measures in the economic sphere" enabling the Russian government to force private Russian companies to provide supplies for Russian military operations.<sup>[8]</sup> The bill prohibits Russian businesses from refusing to fulfil Russian government procurement orders connected to Russian military operations.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces seized the remaining territory between Lysychansk and Luhansk Oblast's administrative borders on July 3.
- Russian forces launched assaults northeast of Bakhmut and north of Slovyansk but did not secure new territorial gains.
- Russian forces conducted extensive artillery attacks in the western part of the Southern Axis likely to disrupt Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- The Kremlin continued to set conditions for potential Russian annexation of proxy republics.
- Ukrainian partisans reportedly derailed a Russian armored train carrying ammunition near Melitopol on July 2.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros

July 2, 6:45 pm ET

**Ukrainian forces likely conducted a deliberate withdrawal from Lysychansk, resulting in the Russian seizure of the city on July 2.** Geolocated footage showed Russian forces casually walking around northern and southeastern neighborhoods in Lysychansk in a way that suggests that there are few or no remaining Ukrainian forces in the city as of July 2.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian military officials did not publicly announce a troop withdrawal but neither did they report on defensive battles around Lysychansk. Ukrainian Internal Affairs Minister Vadym Denysenko vaguely noted that Russian forces have a "high probability" of capturing Lysychansk but that they will have a difficult time advancing in Donetsk Oblast past Slovyansk and Kramatorsk.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian National Guard Spokesperson Ruslan Muzychuk rejected reports of Russian forces seizing and encircling Lysychansk, but these denials are likely outdated or erroneous.<sup>[3]</sup> The Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Ambassador to Russia, Rodion Miroshnik, had previously claimed that Ukrainian forces began withdrawing from Lysychansk on June 28.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW will continue to monitor the situation.

**Russian forces will likely establish control over the remaining territory of Luhansk Oblast in coming days and will likely then prioritize drives on Ukrainian positions in Siversk before turning to Slovyansk and Bakhmut.** A Ukrainian withdrawal to Siversk would allow Ukrainian forces reduce the risk of immediate encirclement, but Ukrainian forces may continue a fighting withdrawal to a line near the E40 highway from Slovyansk to Bakhmut.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov inspected Russian troop groupings in Ukraine on July 2.**<sup>[5]</sup> The Russian MoD posted a slideshow of images that reportedly prove that Gerasimov still holds his position as Chief of General Staff and that he had recently been in Ukraine, but notably did not include any video footage of Gerasimov's purported inspection of Russian troops. This post was likely a response to recent

speculation that Gerasimov had been removed from his post as part of the Kremlin's purge of high-level Russian military leadership due to Russian failures in Ukraine. The Russian MoD amplified a claim that Ukrainian media has been lying about Gerasimov's removal and stated that Gerasimov is still serving as the Chief of the General Staff.<sup>[6]</sup> The hasty presentation of a slideshow that does not clearly demonstrate that Gerasimov was recently performing his duties in Ukraine suggests that the Russian leadership is sensitive to rumors of a purge of senior Russian officers or possibly to the impression that the senior most officers are absent or unininvolved in the conflict. The Kremlin likely also seeks to retain or rebuild trust in Russian military leadership against the backdrop of major organizational restructuring, failures, and high casualties, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces entered Lysychansk and advanced within the city on July 2.
- Russian forces are conducting offensive operations southwest of Lysychansk likely to push westward towards Siversk and complete the capture of the entirety of Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful ground assaults north of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces conducted limited attacks southwest of Donetsk City but did not make any confirmed gains.
- Ukrainian troops are likely planning to threaten Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) throughout Kharkiv Oblast using Western-supplied weapons.
- Ukrainian counterattacks and partisan activity continue to force Russian troops to prioritize defensive operations along the Southern Axis.
- Proxy leadership may be setting conditions for the direct annexation of proxy republics by the Russian Federation.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 1

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros

July 1, 6:45pm ET

**The Kremlin is likely setting conditions for crypto-mobilization of the Russian economy in preparation for a protracted war in Ukraine.** The Kremlin proposed an amendment to federal laws on Russian Armed Forces supply matters to the Russian State Duma on June 30, that would introduce "special measures in the economic sphere" obliging Russian businesses (regardless of ownership) to supply Russian special military and counterterrorist operations.<sup>[1]</sup> The amendment would prohibit Russian businesses from refusing to accept state orders for special military operations and allow the Kremlin to change employee contracts and work conditions, such as forcing workers to work during the night or federal holidays. The Kremlin noted in the amendment's description that the ongoing special military operation in Ukraine exposed supply shortages, specifically materials needed to repair military equipment, and stated that Russian officials need to "concentrate their efforts in certain sectors of the economy." Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely mobilizing the Russian economy and industry to sustain the ongoing war effort, but has not yet taken parallel measures to mobilize Russian manpower on a large scale.

**Russian authorities are likely taking measures to integrate the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) directly into the Russian energy system, contradicting previous Russian statements that the Zaporizhzhia NPP would sell electricity to Ukraine.** Olga Koshehna, an independent expert on nuclear energy, stated on June 30 that Russia's Rosatom (Russian state-owned nuclear energy corporation) employees have been taking measures at the Zaporizhzhia NPP to potentially divert its energy to the Russian energy grid.<sup>[2]</sup> Koshehna added that Russian forces have been working in Chonhard (southern Kherson Oblast) to repair the main energy transmission line that runs into Crimea, which Ukrainian forces had destroyed in 2015 following Russia's seizure of the transmission line after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Representatives of Ukraine's Ukrenergo electricity transmission operator had stated as recently as late May that it would be physically impossible for Russia to divert Ukrainian electricity to Russia following the destruction of those transmission lines.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces are likely seeking to ensure physical access to transmission lines in order to support the direct flow of Ukrainian energy into Russia, which may explain some of the military activities observed in recent weeks in the Russian-occupied portions of Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

Russian authorities had indicated on May 18 that while the Zaporizhzhia NPP would work for Russia, it would continue to sell energy to Ukraine, as ISW reported.[4] However, it is becoming increasingly evident that Russian authorities are taking measures to integrate Ukrainian economic assets directly into the Russian economy. Reports that Russian forces may be preparing a false flag provocation at the Zaporizhzhia NPP could be part of this Russian effort—Moscow might use such a false flag attack to accuse Ukrainian authorities of mismanaging nuclear assets and justify taking full control of them and their output.[5]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued efforts to encircle Lysychansk and conducted offensive operations to the south and southwest of the city.
- Russian forces have likely not yet reached the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway on the ground but are denying Ukrainian forces use of it by continuing artillery and airstrikes against remaining Ukrainian positions along the road.
- Russian forces focused on regrouping and improving their tactical positions north of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground assaults in northern Kharkiv Oblast and continued shelling Ukrainian positions north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted artillery and missile strikes along the Southern Axis.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to expand the pool of recruits available to fight in Ukraine.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Frederick W. Kagan, and Grace Mapes

June 30, 7:25pm ET

Russian forces retreated from the Snake Island on June 30 following a Ukrainian missile and artillery campaign. The Russian Defense Ministry spun the retreat as “a step of goodwill.”[1] The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that the Kremlin does not interfere with United Nations (UN) efforts to organize a humanitarian corridor for agricultural export from Ukraine but did not acknowledge the Ukrainian artillery and missile campaign that had actually caused the retreat. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command had announced elements of that campaign on June 21. [2] The Russian Defense Ministry has claimed that Russian forces defeated all Ukrainian drone and missile attacks leading up to their retreat despite considerable evidence to the contrary.[3] The Russian defeat on the Snake Island will alleviate some pressure off the Ukrainian coast by removing Russian air defense and anti-shipping missile systems from the island. The retreat itself will not end the sea blockade, however, as Russian forces have access to land-based anti-ship systems in Crimea and western Kherson Oblast that can still target Ukrainian cargo as well as the use of the remaining ships of the Black Sea Fleet.

Russian milbloggers overwhelmingly defended the Russian decision to withdraw troops and equipment from the island, claiming that Russian forces are prioritizing the “liberation of Donbas.”[4] Some said that Russian forces do not have enough capacity to destroy Ukrainian coastal troops and others claimed that Russian forces will be more successful striking Ukrainians when they attempt to deploy their own troops to the island. Milbloggers have previously criticized the Russian military command for failing to retreat to save equipment and manpower and are likely content with the Russian retreat from the Snake Island.[5] Milbloggers, following the Kremlin line, did not acknowledge the role Ukrainian strikes against the island played in compelling Russian forces to retreat.

Russian authorities continue to galvanize the support of proxy actors in order to support force generation efforts. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov announced on June 29 that another Akhmat special battalion, the Vostok (east)-Akhmat battalion, has been successfully formed and will shortly move to its point of permanent deployment and begin active service.[6] As ISW reported on June 28, Kadyrov stated he intends to form four new Akhmat special operations battalions and announced the formation of the Zapad (west)-Akhmat battalion early this week.[7]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian troops made limited gains within the Lysychansk Oil Refinery and around Lysychansk.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations to the south and east of Bakhmut and to the north of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces continued efforts to regain control of settlements north of Kharkiv City.
- Ukrainian counteroffensives continue to force Russian troops on the Southern Axis to prioritize defensive operations.
- Russian occupation authorities took measures to ensure further economic and financial integration of occupied areas into the Russian system.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Grace Mappes

June 29, 6 pm ET

The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on June 28 that the Kremlin is setting conditions to annex areas of Kherson and Zaporizhia into the Russian Federation under the template of the pre-1917 “Tavria Gubernia.”<sup>[1]</sup> The Tavriia (or Tauride) Gubernia was a historical province of the Russian Empire.<sup>[2]</sup> Under the Tavriia Gubernia scenario, the left bank of Kherson Oblast and part of Zaporizhia Oblast would be directly annexed to the Russian Federation, likely as a single unit.<sup>[3]</sup> The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated that Russian authorities are preparing for a pseudo-referendum to set conditions for the annexation of the Tavriia Gubernia (as opposed to proxy “people’s republics”). The Russians are also requiring Ukrainian citizens in southern Ukraine to open bank accounts with Russian state-owned Promsvyazbank.<sup>[4]</sup> Head of Ukraine’s Kherson Oblast Administration Hennadiy Lahuta reported that Russian forces have locked down civilian traffic in northern Kherson Oblast and are not allowing anyone to enter or exit occupied territory, which may be an additional attempt to control the civilian population in preparation for annexation measures.<sup>[5]</sup>

Ukrainian sources warned on June 29 that Russian forces may be planning a false flag provocation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) to accuse Ukrainian authorities of mishandling nuclear facilities.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukrainian nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom stated that Russian occupation authorities are planning to throw unsafe objects into the cooling system at the NPP in order to compromise the plant’s cooling mechanisms.<sup>[7]</sup> Mayor of Enerhodar Dmytro Orlov added that Russian troops have been kidnapping and torturing employees of the NPP to coerce confessions that employees dropped weapons into the cooling systems to sabotage the plant and blame Ukrainian authorities for paying inadequate attention to the management of the NPP.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian troops have previously demonstrated irresponsible and dangerous behavior in and around nuclear power plants, firing on nuclear facilities at the Zaporizhzhia NPP in early March and digging into radioactive soil in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.<sup>[9]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian sources reported that Russian authorities may be preparing to annex areas of southern Ukraine as the “Tavriia Gubernia” and that Russian authorities are setting conditions for annexation through preparing referenda in occupied areas.
- Russian forces may be planning a false flag provocation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Lysychansk.
- Russian forces made marginal gains east of Bakhmut along the E40 highway and may seek to prepare for a direct offensive on Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations to advance on Slovyansk from the northwest near the Kharkiv-Donetsk Oblast border.
- Russian forces are continuing to engage in offensive operations north of Kharkiv City, indicating that the Kremlin has territorial ambitions beyond the Donbas that will continue to attrit manpower and equipment, potentially at the cost of offensive power on more critical axes of advance.
- Russian forces continued to reinforce their defensive presence along the Southern Axis.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 28

## **Click here to read the full report.**

**Kateryna Stepanenko, Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, Mason Clark, and Grace Mapes**

**June 28, 7:45 pm ET**

**Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

**Ukrainian forces are likely conducting a fighting withdrawal that may include pulling back from Lysychansk and Luhansk Oblast in the near future and which probably aims to force the Russian offensive to culminate prematurely.** The Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Ambassador to Russia Rodion Miroshnik and Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces began a large-scale withdrawal from Lysychansk towards Siversk, Kramatorsk, and Slovyansk on June 28.<sup>[1]</sup> Although ISW cannot confirm independently Miroshnik's claims of an ongoing withdrawal, Ukrainian forces may continue the fighting withdrawal that began in Severodonetsk to Ukrainian strongholds around Siversk, Kramatorsk, and Slovyansk. The staunch but limited Ukrainian defense of Severodonetsk imposed high costs on the Russians despite new Russian tactics intended to limit Russian casualties. Kyiv could continue this approach until the Russian attack culminates or Ukrainian forces reach more defensible positions along a straighter line dotted with fortified cities and towns.

**The pace and outcome of the next phase of the current campaign may depend in part on Russia's ability to recoup combat power from the forces that participated in the Battle of Severodonetsk.** The remaining Russian forces in Severodonetsk will need to cross the Siverskyi Donets River into Lysychansk from Severodonetsk or its surrounding settlements to participate further in the Russian offensive. This movement could require some time since the Russians destroyed the three main bridges across the river near the city. Miroshnik claimed that Russian forces have already crossed the Siverskyi Donets River from Kremenna and are building bridgeheads for further attacks on Lysychansk from the north.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW cannot independently verify Miroshnik's claims. If they are true, and Russian forces threaten to complete the cauldron by pushing from the north and southwest of Lysychansk, then Ukrainian forces will likely abandon Lysychansk as well and conduct a fighting withdrawal to more defensible positions. Russian forces that have engaged in continuous offensive operations in Severodonetsk will also require some time to restore combat capabilities before participating in an assault on northern or northeastern Lysychansk. An unnamed Pentagon official stated that Russian forces continue to endure significant losses in fights for small territorial gains, and Russian groups that fought in Severodonetsk likely lost personnel and equipment.<sup>[3]</sup> The locations and strength of the Russian troops that seized Severodonetsk remain unclear at this time, however. A notable acceleration of Russian attacks from the south of Lysychansk or from across the Siverskyi Donets River would likely indicate that the Russians have completed a redeployment of forces from Severodonetsk. ISW has not yet observed such indicators.

**Ukraine's Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) reported that the Kremlin replaced Western Military District (WMD) Commander Alexander Zhuravlev with the former commander of the 8th Combined Arms Army (CAA) Andrey Sychevoy.**<sup>[4]</sup> CIT added that WMD Chief of Staff Aleksey Zavizion was relieved. ISW cannot independently verify these reports and will continue to monitor the situation for further corroboration.

**Russian forces continue to look for additional reserves to replenish personnel losses in Ukraine, but these reserves are unlikely to initiate rotations or provide combat-ready manpower.** Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov announced that he will form four new battalions "with an impressive number of personnel" on June 26.<sup>[5]</sup> Kadyrov also announced that Chechen forces formed a West-Akhmat battalion "in the shortest possible" time and claimed that the unit would deploy to a well-equipped base in Chechnya. Chechen forces will likely deploy the newly-created battalion to the frontline without sufficient training. Social media users also released footage of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) rounding up "volunteers" in Donetsk City as part of the recruitment campaign on June 28.<sup>[6]</sup> Wives of servicemen of the Russian 5th Guards Separate Tank Brigade issued a video plea for the immediate rotation of their husbands back home, noting that their husbands had left their permanent bases of deployment in January 2022 for "exercises in Belarus."<sup>[7]</sup> The video indicates that the Russian military command has expressed its intentions for unit rotations.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces continued to launch assault operations south and southwest of Lysychansk. The Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) officials claimed that Ukrainian forces had begun to withdraw from the city, but ISW cannot confirm these claims.**

- Russian forces launched unsuccessful offensive operations north of Slovyansk and conducted spoiling attacks on settlements west of Izyum, likely to disrupt Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- Russian forces failed to advance along the Kharkiv City-Belgorod highway and continued to undertake measures to hinder Ukrainian advances towards the international border or Izyum.
- Ukrainian forces continued to launch counteroffensives north of Kherson City and reportedly liberated two settlements.
- Russian forces continued to transfer military equipment and personnel east of Melitopol.
- Russian occupation authorities are maintaining unsuccessful efforts to introduce ruble salary payments and set conditions to inflate electoral numbers in a future referendum.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

By Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, George Barros and Grace Mapes

June 27, 4:45pm ET

A Russian missile strike hit a shopping mall in a residential area of Kremenchuk, Poltava Oblast on June 27, likely killing many civilians.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian sources stated that over 1,000 civilians were inside the mall at the time of the strike, and officials are still clarifying the number of casualties.<sup>[2]</sup> The Kremenchuk strike follows a wider intensification of Russian missile strikes against Ukrainian infrastructure and civilian targets in recent days. Advisor to the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs Vadym Denisenko stated on June 26 that Russian forces have begun a campaign of massive and largely indiscriminate missile strikes against Ukrainian cities, which echoes statements made by an unnamed US defense official on June 27 that Russian forces are increasingly relying on artillery and missile strikes to advance operations in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> As Russian forces continue to burn through their supply of high-precision weaponry, such attacks that cause substantial collateral civilian damage will likely escalate.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Russian military authorities continue to seek ways to replenish their increasingly exhausted force capabilities without announcing general mobilization.** An unnamed senior US defense official stated on June 27 that Russian forces are likely running low on senior military leaders and are relying more heavily on retired officers and reserves to replace officer casualties.<sup>[5]</sup> The UK Ministry of Defense similarly reported that Russian forces will likely rely heavily on reserve echelons, namely the Combat Army Reserve (BARS) and Human Mobilization Resource, in order to galvanize volunteer support and fill out the third battalion tactical group (BTG) within regular (and depleted) brigades.<sup>[6]</sup> As ISW has previously assessed, such reserves are unlikely to provide Russian forces with meaningful regeneration of force capabilities.

### Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces struck a shopping mall in Kremenchuk as part of a recent escalation in strikes against Ukrainian infrastructure and cities.
- Russian forces made incremental advances southwest of Lysychansk near the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway but have not entirely severed Ukrainian lines of communication into Bakhmut.
- Russian forces made measured advances during offensive operations to the east of Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces repelled Russian offensives north of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces made limited and localized attacks along contested frontlines around Kharkiv City but did not make any advances on June 27.
- Ukrainian counteroffensives along the Southern Axis continue to force Russian troops to prioritize defensive operations along the line of contact.
- Russian occupation authorities are taking steps to strengthen economic control of occupied territories and force Ukrainian civilians to switch to the ruble.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, and Grace Mapes

June 26, 4:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted a massive missile strike against the Shevchenkivskyi district of Kyiv on June 26, likely to coincide with the ongoing summit of G7 leaders.**<sup>[1]</sup> This is the first such major strike on Kyiv since late April and is likely a direct response to Western leaders discussing aid to Ukraine at the ongoing G7 summit, much like the previous strikes on April 29 during UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' visit to Kyiv.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian government sources reported that Russian forces targeted infrastructure in the Shevchenkivskyi district using X101 missiles fired from Tu-95 and Tu-160 bombers over the Caspian Sea and noted the Russian attack was an attempt to "show off" their capabilities.<sup>[3]</sup> Open-source Twitter account GeoConfirmed stated that the strikes targeted the general vicinity of the Artem State Joint-Stock Holding Company, a manufacturer of air-to-air missiles, automated air-guided missile training and maintenance systems, anti-tank guided missiles, and aircraft equipment.<sup>[4]</sup> GeoConfirmed noted that Russian forces likely fired the missiles from the maximum possible range, which would have interfered with GPS and radar correlation and resulted in the strike hitting civilian infrastructure, and additionally hypothesized some of the missiles may have been fired from Russian-occupied southern Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian forces likely targeted the Artem Plant as a means of posturing against Western military aid to Ukraine during the G7 summit and inflicted additional secondary damage to residential infrastructure.<sup>[6]</sup>

**The Kremlin continues to manipulate Russian legislation to carry out "covert mobilization" to support operations in Ukraine without conducting full mobilization.** The Russian State Duma announced plans to review an amendment to the law on military service on June 28 that would allow military officials to offer contracts to young men immediately upon "coming of age" or graduating high school, thus circumventing the need to complete military service as conscripts.<sup>[7]</sup> Head of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Kyrylo Budanov stated on June 25 that the Kremlin is carrying out "covert mobilization" and that due to continuous Russian mobilization efforts, Ukrainian forces cannot wait for the Russians to exhaust their offensive potential before launching counteroffensives.<sup>[8]</sup> Budanov remarked that the Kremlin has already committed 330,000 personnel to the war, which constitutes over a third of the entirety of the Russian Armed Forces, and that Russian President Vladimir Putin will face substantial domestic and social opposition if he increases this number by carrying out general (as opposed to covert) mobilization, as ISW has previously assessed.

**Colonel-General Genady Zhidko, current director of Russia's Military-Political Directorate, is likely in overall command of Russian forces in Ukraine.** Zhidko sat next to and conferred with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu during an inspection of Russian ground forces in Ukraine on June 26, though Zhidko's nameplate was notably blurred out by the Russian Ministry of Defense and his position has not been officially confirmed, unlike the commanders of Russia's two force groupings in Ukraine that ISW reported on June 26.<sup>[9]</sup> Conflict Intelligence Team previously reported on May 26 that Zhidko replaced Commander of the Southern Military District Alexander Dvornikov as overall commander in Ukraine, though ISW could not independently verify this change at the time.<sup>[10]</sup> Reports on June 21 of Dvornikov's dismissal and Zhidko's prominent place in Shoigu's June 26 visit likely confirm this change.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted a missile strike against Kyiv for the first time since April 29, likely to coincide with the ongoing G7 leadership summit.
- Russian Colonel-General Genady Zhidko has likely taken over the role of theatre commander of operations in Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued attacks against the southern outskirts of Lysychansk and consolidated control of Severodonetsk and surrounding settlements.
- Russian forces are conducting operations to the east of Bakhmut to maintain control of the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground assaults to the northwest of Slovyansk.

- Russian forces intensified artillery strikes against Ukrainian positions along the Southern Axis.
- Russian occupation authorities are escalating measures to stem Ukrainian partisan activity in occupied areas through increased filtration measures and the abduction of civilians.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 25

**Click here to read the full report.**

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

June 25, 5:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the commanders of the “central” and “southern” groupings of forces in Ukraine on June 24, confirming previously rumored changes reported on June 21.<sup>[1]</sup> Spokesperson for the Russian MoD Igor Konashenkov stated on June 24 that Commander of the Central Military District Colonel General Alexander Lapin is in command of the “central” group of forces, which is responsible for operations against Lysychansk (and presumably Severodonetsk).<sup>[2]</sup> Konashenkov additionally stated that Army General Sergei Surovkin, commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces, commands the “southern” group of forces and oversaw the encirclement of Hirske and Zolote.<sup>[3]</sup> The Russian MoD’s announcement confirms ISW’s assessment from June 21 that the Russian high command is reshuffling and restructuring military command in order to better organize operations in Ukraine, though the Russian MoD statement does not state when the changes occurred.<sup>[4]</sup> The UK MoD confirmed that the Russian command has removed several generals from key operational roles in Ukraine, including Commander of the Airborne Forces (VDV) Colonel General Andrei Serdyukov and Commander of Russia’s Southern Military District Alexander Dvornikov, who was likely was acting as overall theatre commander.<sup>[5]</sup> The UK MoD noted that command of the Southern Military District will transfer to Surovkin.<sup>[6]</sup> The Russian MoD’s statement notably only discusses the center and south *force groupings* (not the Southern Military District as a whole), but Dvornikov has likely been removed from his previous role.

**Russian forces conducted an abnormally large series of missile strikes against Ukrainian rear areas on June 25.**<sup>[7]</sup> The Ukrainian Airforce Command reported that Russian forces fired over 50 ground-, air-, and sea-based missiles at Ukraine and targeted areas in Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Khmelnytskyi, Chernihiv, Lviv, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.<sup>[8]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that six Russian Tu-22M3 bombers departed from the Shaykova airbase in Belarus and launched 12 Kh-22 cruise missiles at land targets in Kyiv, Sumy, and Chernihiv Oblasts, which is the first such launch from Belarus.<sup>[9]</sup> The Ukrainian Airforce Command noted that Russian forces used sea-based Kalibr missiles against targets in western Ukraine, X-22 and ground-based Iskander and Tochka-U missiles against targets in northern Ukraine, and ONYX missiles and Bastion complexes against targets in southern Ukraine.<sup>[10]</sup> Ukrainian air defense reportedly shot down many of the missiles, which were likely intended to target critical support infrastructure in areas of Ukraine where there is no direct combat.

**Ukrainian intelligence assessed that the Kremlin is continuing covert partial mobilization efforts in support of what it increasingly recognizes as a war of attrition in Eastern Ukraine.**

[11] Representative of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky stated that the Kremlin recognizes it is waging a war of attrition and is conducting secretive partial mobilization efforts while additionally mobilizing the BARS (Combat Army Reserve of the Country) system and other constant-readiness elements. Skibitsky noted that 105 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) are taking part in the war in Ukraine and that Russian reserve capabilities could increase this number to anywhere between 150 and 160 BTGs but did not specify a timeframe for this mobilization. Skibitsky reiterated that the Kremlin’s main goal is to secure control of the entire Donbas and that its secondary priority is consolidation of its control of Kherson Oblast by September 11, when the Kremlin seeks to hold referenda to directly annex territories or create quasi-state “People’s Republics.” The Kremlin intends to conduct a protracted conflict in Ukraine and is seeking to advance mobilization efforts to support long-term military and political goals in occupied areas of Ukraine.

**Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) firmly stated that Belarusian involvement in the war in Ukraine on behalf of Russia remains highly unlikely.**<sup>[12]</sup> GUR representative Vadym Skibitsky stated that Belarusian forces will not attack Ukraine without the support of Russian troops, of which there are approximately 1,500 in Belarus. Skibitsky noted that Belarus has seven BTGs on a rotating basis near the border with Ukraine and that the formation of a Russian-Belarusian joint shock group would take three to four weeks, with two to three weeks needed to simply deploy sufficient Russian forces into Belarus. The GUR's statement reaffirms ISW's previous assessments that, while recent Belarusian actions along the Ukrainian border are threatening and likely intended to fix Ukrainian forces in place with the threat of Belarusian action, they are highly unlikely to preempt actual involvement in the war.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that the leadership of its central and southern groups of forces fighting Ukraine has changed, confirming ISW's previous assessment that the Russian high command is restructuring the leadership of operations in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian intelligence officials emphasized that Belarus remains highly unlikely to join the war in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian sources confirmed that Russian forces have taken full control of Severodonetsk and are fighting within Lysychansk.
- Russian forces made measured gains to the north and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful attempts to advance southeast of Izyum toward Sloviansk.
- Russian forces continued positional battles north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces attempted to strengthen their defensive lines and recapture lost positions on the Southern Axis.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 24**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Grace Mappes

June 24, 7:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian officials ordered a controlled withdrawal of troops from Severodonetsk on June 24.** Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai announced that Ukrainian forces are withdrawing from "broken positions" in Severodonetsk to prevent further personnel losses and maintain a stronger defense elsewhere.<sup>[1]</sup> Severodonetsk Regional Military Administration Head Roman Vlasenko stated that several Ukrainian units remain in Severodonetsk as of June 24, but Ukrainian forces will complete the full withdrawal in "a few days."<sup>[2]</sup> An unnamed Pentagon official noted that Ukrainian withdrawal from Severodonetsk will allow Ukrainian troops to secure better defensive positions and further wear down Russian manpower and equipment.<sup>[3]</sup> The Pentagon official noted that Russian forces pushing on Severodonetsk already show signs of "wear and tear" and "debilitating morale," which will only further slow Russian offensive operations in Donbas. Russian forces have been attempting to seize Severodonetsk since at least March 13, exhausting their forces and equipment over three months.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Ukrainian forces will likely maintain their defenses around Lysychansk and continue to exhaust Russian troops after the fall of Severodonetsk.** Ukrainian forces will occupy higher ground in Lysychansk, which may allow them to repel Russian attacks for some time if the Russians are unable to encircle or isolate them. Russian forces in Severodonetsk will also need to complete river crossings from the east, which will require additional time and effort. Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik claimed that Russian forces will completely encircle Lysychansk in the next two or three days after fully interdicting Ukrainian ground lines of communications (GLOCs).<sup>[5]</sup> Russian forces have successfully secured access to Ukrainian GLOCs along the Hirske-Lysychansk highway by breaking through Hirske on June 24, but Russian forces will need to cut Ukrainian logistics routes from Bakhmut and Siversk to fully isolate Lysychansk. Russian forces are likely to face challenges completing a larger encirclement around Lysychansk due to a failed river crossing in Bilohorivka, northwest of Lysychansk, in early May. Ukrainian forces will likely conduct a deliberate withdrawal from Lysychansk if Russian forces threaten Ukrainian strongholds in the area.

**Ukrainian intelligence warned that Russian forces will carry out false-flag attacks in Belarus to draw Belarusian forces into the Russian invasion of Ukraine.** The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russian sabotage groups and mercenaries arrived in Mozyr, Belarus, to detonate apartment buildings and civilian infrastructure around the city.<sup>[6]</sup> The GUR noted that Russian saboteurs will follow a pattern similar to apartment bombings in Chechnya in the early 2000s. Ukrainian officials have previously reported on possible false-flag attacks in Belarus throughout the past four months.

**Unidentified assailants resumed attacks against Russian military recruitment centers on June 24, indicating intensifying discontent with covert mobilization.** Russian outlet Baza reported two incidents where unknown attackers threw Molotov Cocktails at military recruitment offices in Belgorod City and Perm on June 24.<sup>[7]</sup> Baza also reported that Belgorod Oblast Police started a search for four contract servicemen—one sergeant and three ordinary soldiers—who have deserted their military unit stationed in Belgorod Oblast.<sup>[8]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces continued to drive north to Lysychansk and have likely encircled Ukrainian troops in Hirske-Zolote.
- Ukrainian officials announced that Ukrainian forces are fighting their last battles in the industrial zone of Severodonetsk before withdrawing from the city.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations west of Izyum and north of Slovyansk. Russian forces will likely prioritize encircling Ukrainian troops in Lysychansk and interdicting remaining GLOCs northwest of the city before resuming a full-scale offensive operation on Slovyansk.
- Ukrainian forces are continuing to launch counteroffensive operations along the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border and are threatening Russian forces in Kherson City.
- Ukrainian partisans continued to attack Russian collaborators in Kherson City.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 23**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, and Grace Mappes

June 23, 6:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

While Belarus and Russia retain close military cooperation and the ongoing Belarusian exercises are likely intended in part to threaten Ukraine, Belarus remains unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine on behalf of Russia. As ISW has previously assessed, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko likely cannot afford the domestic consequences of involving his limited military assets in a costly foreign war.<sup>[5]</sup> Unsupported Belarusian forces are additionally highly unlikely to be effective, and Russia lacks the reserves necessary to conduct another offensive toward Kyiv. These exercises are undoubtedly intended to posture and threaten Ukrainian border areas but are unlikely to preempt actual involvement in hostilities.

**Russian forces have made substantial gains in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area over the last several days and Ukrainian troops continue to suffer high casualties, but Ukrainian forces have fundamentally accomplished their objective in the battle by slowing down and degrading Russian forces.** Head of the Luhansk Oblast Administration Serhiy Haidai stated on June 23 that Ukrainian troops may have to retreat to avoid encirclement in Lysychansk, which indicates that Ukrainian authorities are setting conditions to prepare for the ultimate loss of both Severodonetsk and Lysychansk.<sup>[6]</sup> As ISW has previously assessed, however, the loss of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk will not represent a major turning point in the war.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainian troops have succeeded for weeks in drawing substantial quantities of Russian personnel, weapons, and equipment into the area and have likely degraded Russian forces' overall capabilities while preventing Russian forces from focusing on more advantageous axes of advance. Russian offensive operations will likely stall in the coming weeks, whether or not Russian forces capture the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area, likely granting Ukrainian forces the opportunity to launch prudent counteroffensives. The Kremlin's ideological fixation on the capture of Severodonetsk, much like the earlier siege of Azovstal, will likely be to the ultimate detriment of Russian capabilities in future advances in Ukraine. The loss of Severodonetsk is a loss for Ukraine in the sense that any terrain captured by Russian forces is a loss—but the battle of Severodonetsk will not be a decisive Russian victory.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Belarusian forces are conducting mobilization exercises along the Ukrainian border but are unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine due to their low capabilities and the adverse domestic implications of military involvement on behalf of Russia.
- Russian forces have likely reached the southern outskirts of Lysychansk and are reinforcing their grouping around Severodonetsk to complete the capture of both

Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. These gains remain unlikely to provide Russian forces with a decisive edge in further operations in Ukraine and have further degraded Russian capabilities.

- Russian forces are continuing efforts to encircle the Ukrainian grouping in Hirske and Zolote and are likely moving to take control of these settlements.
- Russian forces have likely successfully interdicted Ukrainian lines of communication along the T1302 highway and are using recent gains along the highway to reinforce assaults on Lysychansk.
- Russian forces amassed equipment and continued building defensive capabilities along the Southern Axis.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Grace Mapes

June 22, 5:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Reinforced Russian air-defense systems in eastern Ukraine are increasingly limiting the effectiveness of Ukrainian drones, undermining a key Ukrainian capability in the war. *Foreign Policy*'s Jack Detsch quoted several anonymous Ukrainian officials and military personnel that Ukrainian forces have largely halted the use of Turkish Bayraktar drones, which were used to great effect earlier in the war, due to improvements in Russian air-defense capabilities.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian officials are reportedly increasingly concerned that US-provided Gray Eagle strike drones will also be shot down by reinforced Russian air defense over the Donbas.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian forces have reportedly scaled back air operations to 20 to 30 sorties per day and are facing a deficit of available aircraft for active pilots. Russian forces are likely prioritizing deploying air defenses to eastern Ukraine to nullify Ukrainian operations and to protect the artillery systems Russian forces are reliant on to make advances. However, the Ukrainian air force and armed drones remain active elsewhere, inflicting several successful strikes on targets in Kherson Oblast in the last week.

Members of the Russian military community continue to comment on the shortcomings of Russian force generation capabilities, which are having tangible impacts on the morale and discipline of Russians fighting in Ukraine. Russian milblogger Yuri Kotylenok claimed that Russian troops lack the numbers and strength for success in combat in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Kotylenok accused Russian leadership of deploying new and under-trained recruits and called for replenishment of forces with well-trained recruits with ground infantry experience—though the Russian military is unlikely to be able to quickly generate such a force, as ISW has previously assessed. Despite growing calls for increased recruitment from nationalist figures, Russian leadership continues to carry out coercive partial mobilization efforts that are only producing limited numbers of replacements while negatively impacting the morale and discipline of forcibly mobilized personnel. Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) claimed that Russian authorities in Luhansk are arranging gas leaks in apartment buildings to force men who are hiding from mobilization into the streets.<sup>[4]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) additionally reported that Russian soldiers in occupied Tokmak, Zaporizhia Oblast, are appealing to local Ukrainian doctors to issue them certificates alleging medical inability to continue military service.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike (likely with a loitering munition, though this cannot be confirmed) on a Russian oil refinery in Novoshakhtinsk, Rostov Oblast, on June 22.**

[6] Russian Telegram channel Voenyi Osvedomitel claimed that the strike, which targeted Russian infrastructure within 15 km of the Ukrainian border, originated from Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainian forces have not targeted Russian infrastructure for several weeks, and this strike is likely an attempt to disrupt Russian logistics and fuel supply to Russian operations in eastern Ukraine.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to make gains to the south of Lysychansk and will likely reach the city in the coming days, although they are unlikely to quickly capture the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area.

- Russian forces continued offensive operations towards Slovyansk and made minor advances.
- Russian forces intensified efforts to interdict Ukrainian lines of communication along the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway in order to support Russian operations towards Lysychansk.
- Russian forces focused on defensive operations along the Southern Axis and may have made marginal gains within Mykolaiv Oblast.
- Russian authorities are continuing measures to facilitate the economic integration of occupied areas.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Grace Mappes

June 21, 7:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin recently replaced the commander of the Russian Airborne (VDV) forces and may be in the process of radically reshuffling the command structure of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, indicating a possible purge of senior officers blamed for failures in Ukraine. Several Russian outlets confirmed that the current Chief of Staff of the Central Military District, Colonel-General Mikhail Teplinsky, will replace the current Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces, Colonel-General Andrey Serdyukov.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian sources previously reported on June 17 that the Kremlin fired Serdyukov for poor performance during the invasion and high casualties among paratroopers, but ISW could not confirm this reporting at the time.<sup>[2]</sup> Several sources are additionally reporting contradictory claims about replacements for the current Southern Military District Commander—and overall commander of the Russian invasion of Ukraine—Army General Alexander Dvornikov:

- Russian reserve officer Oleg Marzoev claimed on June 21 that Russian military officials will soon appoint General of the Army Sergey Surovikin, the current commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces, as commander of the Southern Military District (SMD), effectively replacing current SMD Commander Alexander Dvornikov.<sup>[3]</sup>
- Investigative journalism group Bellingcat previously reported on June 17 that Russian President Vladimir Putin planned to replace Dvornikov as the commander of the invasion of Ukraine following Dvornikov's excessive drinking and lack of trust among Russian forces.<sup>[4]</sup>
- Ukraine's Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) reported on June 19 that Putin replaced Dvornikov as the commander of the Ukrainian operation with Colonel-General Gennady Zhidko, the head of the Military-Political Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>[5]</sup>
- An unofficial but widely followed Russian Airborne Troops social media page claimed that Dvornikov has been promoted and that Serdyukov will take his position within the SMD. This claim is highly unlikely to be true given that pro-Kremlin sources announced Serdyukov's retirement.<sup>[6]</sup>

ISW cannot independently verify these reports and will continue to monitor the situation for corroboration. However, if these varied reports are all accurate, former Aerospace Forces Commander Surovikin has replaced Dvornikov (who may have been forced to retire) as commander of the Southern Military District, but Zhidko has been appointed commander of Russian operations in Ukraine, despite not directly commanding Russian combat troops in his permanent role. Zhidko currently directs the body of the Russian Ministry of Defense responsible for maintaining morale and ideological control within the Russian military, rather than commanding a military district. As ISW previously reported, Southern Military District Commander Dvornikov was the natural choice to command Russia's operations in Ukraine following Russia's loss in the Battle of Kyiv, as the majority of Russian offensive operations are occurring within the Southern Military District's area of responsibility. The appointment of a separate commander over the Southern Military District, and the replacement of the commander of the SMD in the middle of major combat operations, is a drastic step that would speak to severe crises within the Russian high command, and possibly a purge by the Kremlin. **Such drastic rotations within the Russian military, if true, are not actions taken by a force on the verge of a major success and indicate ongoing dysfunction in the Kremlin's conduct of the war.**

**Russian forces are successfully advancing toward Lysychansk from the south rather than making an opposed river crossing from Severodonetsk, threatening Ukrainian defenses in the area.** ISW previously forecasted that Russian forces would seek to attack toward Lysychansk from the south to negate the defensive advantage that the Siverskyi Donets River would grant Ukrainian defenders opposing a direct assault from Severodonetsk. Russian forces appear to be securing such an advance and will likely attack the outskirts of Lysychansk within the coming week. **This Russian advance is a clear setback for Ukrainian defenses in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area, but Russian forces will likely require further protracted battles with Ukrainian forces similar to the block-by-block fighting seen in Mariupol and Severodonetsk in order to capture Lysychansk.**

**The Kremlin is failing to deter the family members of sailors that survived the sinking of the Moskva from issuing an appeal against the deployment of surviving conscripts to the war in Ukraine as of June 20.**[7] Russian opposition outlet *Novaya Gazeta* published an appeal from the parents of the surviving 49 conscript crewmembers of the *Moskva*, demanding that the Military Prosecutor's Office in Sevastopol, the Committee of Soldier's Mothers, and the Human Rights Commissioner immediately terminate the crewmembers' deployment. The appeal states that Russian commanders did not send the surviving conscripts home from their deployment following the sinking of *Moskva* and that they will be recommitted to hostilities on June 30. The appeal noted that the survivors refuse to participate in further assignments due to psychological distress and are currently stationed on the old ship *Ladnyi*, which the appeal claims is unfit for combat. The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) previously reported that Russian forces have threatened the families of *Moskva* sailors with criminal prosecution and nullification of any financial benefits to prevent them from speaking out against Russian operations.[8]

**Russian forces continue to face force generation challenges and are committing unprepared contract servicemen to the invasion of Ukraine.** The BBC's Russian service reported on June 20 that new Russian recruits receive only 3 to 7 days of training before being sent to "the most active sectors of the front."<sup>[9]</sup> The BBC also reported that volunteers within the conventional Russian military, Rosgvardia units, and Wagner Group mercenaries have become Russia's main assault force, as opposed to full conventional military units. ISW has previously assessed that Russian units in eastern Ukraine are suffering from poor complements of infantry, slowing their ability to seize urban terrain. The Russian military is offering substantial financial incentives to secure additional recruits with increasing disregard for their age, health, criminal records, and other established service qualifications. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on June 21 that Russian Airborne (VDV) units are forced to recruit reserve officers for short-term three-month contracts due to significant officer losses, and the BBC reported that the Russian Ministry of Defense is offering to pay off the loans and debts of volunteers to entice recruits.<sup>[10]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Kremlin recently replaced the commander of the Russian Airborne (VDV) forces and may have fired the commander of the Southern Military District and appointed a new overall commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, indicating ongoing dysfunction in the Kremlin's conduct of the war.
- Russian forces conducted several successful advances in settlements southeast of Severodonetsk on June 21 and may be able to threaten Lysychansk in the coming days while avoiding a difficult opposed crossing of the Siverskyi Donets River.
- Russian forces continued to launch assaults on settlements along the T1302 Lysychansk-Bakhmut highway to interdict Ukrainian ground lines of communications (GLOCs).
- Russian operations along the Izyum-Sloviansk axis are increasingly stalled as Russian forces prioritize operations around Severodonetsk.
- Russian forces likely recaptured the eastern bank of the Inhulets River from the Ukrainian bridgehead situated near the Kherson-Mykolaiv Oblast border.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly struck Russian positions on Snake Island in the Black Sea, likely to destroy Russian fortifications and equipment on the island, but ISW cannot confirm competing Ukrainian and Russian claims of the results of the attack.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing to face challenges recruiting local collaborators and are likely relying on Russian government personnel to consolidate their societal control of occupied Ukrainian territories.

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

June 20, 5:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian officials are emphasizing that the coming week will be decisive for Russian efforts to take control of Severodonetsk.** Deputy Ukrainian Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Russian leadership has set June 26 as the deadline for Russian forces to reach the Luhansk Oblast administrative border, which will likely result in intensified efforts to take full control of Severodonetsk and move westward towards the Oblast border. Head of the Luhansk Regional State Administration Serhiy Haidai reported that Russian forces control all of Severodonetsk except for the industrial zone as of June 20, which is the first explicit Ukrainian confirmation that Russian forces control all of Severodonetsk with the exception of the Azot plant. Russian forces will likely continue efforts to clear the Azot plant and complete encirclement operations south of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk by driving up the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway.

**Russian authorities likely seek to leverage the consequences of Russia's blockade on Ukrainian grain exports in order to cajole the West into weakening its sanctions.** Head of state-owned propaganda outlet RT Margarita Simonyan stated on June 20 that the famine caused by Russia's blockade on grain exports will force the rest of the world to lift sanctions in order to curb further effects of global famine. Simonyan's statement is especially salient considering a report by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office that Ukraine had generated 12% of global wheat and barley exports and that Russia's blockade has trapped over 20 million tons of grain in storage.

**The UK Ministry of Defense claimed on June 20 that consistent failures of the Russian air force have significantly contributed to Russia's limited success in Ukraine.** The UK MoD emphasized that the Russian air force has continually underperformed and been largely risk-averse, failing to establish air superiority or give Russian forces a decisive advantage in Ukraine. The report additionally claimed that training procedures for air force personnel are scripted and designed to impress senior officials but do not adequately prepare personnel for the challenges of active air combat.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian sources stated that the coming week will be decisive for Russian forces to complete the capture of Severodonetsk and that Russian forces will focus troops and equipment on the area.
- Ukrainian sources confirmed that Russian forces control all of Severodonetsk with the exception of the Azot industrial zone, where fights are ongoing.
- Russian sources are likely setting information conditions to justify slow and unsuccessful advances towards Slovyansk from the southeast of Izyum and west of Lyman.
- Russian forces are likely intensifying operations to interdict Ukrainian lines of communication along the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway in order to support escalating operations in Severodonetsk-Lysychansk.
- Russian forces continued to focus on resisting further Ukrainian advances north of Kharkiv City towards the international border.
- Russian forces are continuing defensive operations along the Southern Axis.
- Ukrainian partisan activity is continuing to complicate efforts by Russian occupation authorities to consolidate control of occupied areas.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

June 19, 5:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The UK Ministry of Defense assesses that the Kremlin's continued framing of its invasion of Ukraine as a "special military operation" rather than a war is actively hindering Russian force generation capabilities. The UK Ministry of Defense reported on June 19 that Russian authorities are struggling to find legal means to punish military dissenters and those who refuse to mobilize because the classification of the conflict in Ukraine as a "special military operation" precludes legal punitive measures that could be employed during a formal war.<sup>[1]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin's framing of the war as a "special operation" is compounding consistent issues with poor perceptions of Russian military leadership among Russian nationalists, problems with paying troops, lack of available forces, and unclear objectives among Russian forces. The Kremlin is continuing to attempt to fight a major and grinding war in Ukraine with forces assembled for what the Kremlin incorrectly assumed would be a short invasion against token Ukrainian resistance. The Kremlin continues to struggle to correct this fundamental flaw in its "special military operation."

**Russian authorities likely seek to use war crimes trials against captured Ukrainian servicemen, particularly troops that defended Mariupol, to advance its narratives around the war.** Russian sources reported that the authorities of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) plan to hold war crimes tribunals until the end of August 2022 and that at least one of these tribunals will be held in Mariupol.<sup>[2]</sup> These tribunals will reportedly be judged in accordance with DNR legislation (which notably allows capital punishment, unlike Russian law) and be modeled on the Nuremberg format for war crimes trials. The trials are a sham attempt to try lawful prisoners of war as war criminals and support the Kremlin's false framing of its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine as a "de-Nazification" operation. Despite the fact that DNR authorities plan to try Ukrainian servicemen in the DNR, a source in Russian law enforcement told state-owned media outlet TASS that the deputy commander of the Azov Regiment and the commander of the Ukrainian 36th Marine Brigade will both be transferred to Russia for investigation and trial.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian authorities will likely use these trials to strengthen legal controls of occupied areas and further demoralize Ukrainian defenders by setting a harsh legal precedent during preliminary tribunals, as well as advancing the Kremlin's false narrative of invading Ukraine to "de-Nazify" it.

#### Key Takeaways

- Concentrated Russian artillery power paired with likely understrength infantry units remains insufficient to enable Russian advances within Severodonetsk.
- Russian forces continued to prepare to advance on Slovyansk from southeast of Izyum and west of Lyman.
- Russian forces are focusing on strengthening defensive positions along the Southern Axis due to recent successful Ukrainian counterattacks along the Kherson-Mykolaiv Oblast border.
- Successful Ukrainian counterattacks in the Zaporizhia area are forcing Russian forces to rush reinforcements to this weakened sector of the front line.
- Russian forces are likely conducting false-flag artillery attacks against Russian-held territory to dissuade Ukrainian sentiment and encourage the mobilization of proxy forces.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Grace Mappes

June 18, 3:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces made marginal gains on the outskirts of Severodonetsk on June 18 but have largely stalled along other axes of advance. Russian troops are likely facing mounting losses and troop and equipment degradation that will complicate attempts to renew offensive operations on other critical locations as the slow battle for Severodonetsk continues. As ISW previously assessed, Russian forces will likely be able to seize Severodonetsk in the coming weeks, but at the cost of concentrating

most of their available forces in this small area. Other Russian operations in eastern Ukraine—such as efforts to capture Slovyansk and advance east of Bakhmut—have made little progress in the past two weeks. Russian forces are continuing to fight to push Ukrainian troops away from occupied frontiers north of Kharkiv City and along the Southern Axis, but have not made significant gains in doing so, thus leaving them vulnerable to Ukrainian counteroffensive and partisan pressure.

**The Russian military continues to face challenges with the morale and discipline of its troops in Ukraine.** The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate released what it reported were intercepted phone calls on June 17 and 18 in which Russian soldiers complained about frontline conditions, poor equipment, and overall lack of personnel.[1] One soldier claimed that units have been largely drained of personnel and that certain battalion tactical groups (BTGs) have only 10 to 15 troops remaining in service.[2]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces secured minor gains on the outskirts of Severodonetsk and likely advanced into Metolkine, but Russian operations remain slow.
- Russian forces continued efforts to interdict Ukrainian lines of communication along the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway and conducted ground and artillery strikes along the highway.
- Russian forces seek to push Ukrainian forces out of artillery range of railway lines around Kharkiv City used to supply Russian offensive operations toward Slovyansk.
- Russian forces did not take any confirmed actions along the Southern Axis and continue to face partisan pressure in occupied areas of southern Ukraine.

### Russian Campaign Assessment June 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Grace Mappes

June 17, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces are continuing to deploy additional forces to support offensive operations in the **Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area, and Ukrainian defenses remain strong**. Ukrainian Defense Ministry Spokesperson Oleksandr Motuzanyk reported that Russian forces are transferring tanks, armored personnel carriers, engineering equipment, and vehicles from Svatove, along the Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Luhansk Oblast, to Starobilsk, just 40 km east of Severodonetsk.[1] Social media users reported that Russian forces are likely redeploying equipment from northern Kharkiv Oblast to Donbas and published footage of Russian heavy artillery arriving by rail in Stary Osokol, Belgorod Oblast on June 17.[2] UK Chief of Defense Tony Radakin stated that Russian forces are “diminishing” in power by committing large quantities of personnel and equipment for incremental gains in one area.[3] The Russian military has concentrated the vast majority of its available combat power to capture Severodonetsk and Lysychansk at the expense of other axes of advance and is suffering heavy casualties to do so.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that Russian forces will attack Ukrainian positions near Donetsk City but reiterated that the new tactic will require additional time during his address at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on June 17.[4]** Putin stated that Russian forces will stop what he claimed is Ukrainian shelling of Donetsk City by attacking Ukrainian fortifications from the rear. Putin may have amplified reports of shelling of civilian areas of Donetsk City, which Ukrainian officials have denied, to discourage Western officials from supplying weapons to Ukraine.[5] Putin also declared that Russian forces will fully complete the “special military operation” in Ukraine, and noted that Russian and proxy forces will intensify counter-battery combat.[6] Putin urged Russian forces to refrain from entirely destroying cities that they aim to “liberate,” ignoring the destruction Russian forces have inflicted on Ukrainian cities and the artillery-heavy tactics Russian forces are currently employing in Severodonetsk.”[7]

Unconfirmed Ukrainian sources report that the Kremlin fired the Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces, Colonel-General Andrey Serdyukov, due to mass casualties among Russian

**paratroopers.** Odesa Oblast Military-Civil Administration Spokesperson Serhiy Bratchuk reported that the Kremlin appointed the current chief of staff of the Central Military District, Colonel-General Mikhail Teplinsky, as Serdyukov's replacement and named the Deputy Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces, Lieutenant General Anatoly Kontsevoi, as the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Airborne Forces.<sup>[8][9]</sup> ISW cannot independently confirm these claims or Serdyukov's exact role in the invasion of Ukraine, but they, if true, would indicate that Serdyukov is being held responsible for the poor performance of and high casualties among Russian VDV units, particularly in early operations around Kyiv. Continued dismissals and possible internal purges of senior Russian officers will likely further degrade poor Russian command and control capabilities and the confidence of Russian officers.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to launch unsuccessful ground assaults against Severodonetsk and its southeastern outskirts on June 17.
- Russian forces continued efforts to sever Ukrainian lines of communication to Lyschansk, both from the north toward Slovyansk and in the south near Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces are likely conducting a counteroffensive northwest of Izyum intended to draw Russian forces away from offensive operations toward Slovyansk and disrupt Russian supply lines and are making minor gains.
- Ukrainian forces and aviation continued to strike Russian logistics and fortifications in occupied settlements along the Southern Axis, with localized fighting ongoing.
- Russian forces continued to regroup and transfer personnel within Zaporizhia Oblast to maintain defensive positions along the frontline.
- Russian President Putin reaffirmed his commitment to “completing” the Russian operation in Ukraine but acknowledged that unspecified new Russian tactics (which are likely simply explanations for poor Russian performance) will take time.
- Unconfirmed Ukrainian sources reported that the Kremlin fired the commander of the Russian Airborne Forces, Colonel-General Andrey Serdyukov, due to poor performance.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 16

**Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Grace Mappes**

June 16, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The leaders of Germany, France, Italy, and Romania committed to Ukrainian officials that the West would not demand any concessions from Ukraine to appease Russia and will support Ukraine to the end of the war during a visit to Kyiv on June 16. French President Emmanuel Macron declared that France, Germany, Italy, and Romania are “are doing everything so that Ukraine alone can decide its fate.”<sup>[1]</sup> Macron added that Ukraine “must be able to win” and pledged to provide six more self-propelled howitzers.<sup>[2]</sup> German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that Germany will continue to provide financial, humanitarian, and weapons assistance for “Ukraine’s war of independence.”<sup>[3]</sup> Macron, Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis additionally vowed to back Ukraine’s bid to become an official candidate for European Union membership.<sup>[4]</sup> Sustained Western military support to Ukraine will be essential to enable Ukrainian forces to liberate Russian-occupied territory.

**Ukrainian defense officials explicitly requested Western heavy artillery, unmanned aerial vehicles, and multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS) ahead of a protracted war.** Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Denys Sharapov and Land Force Command Logistics Commander Volodymyr Karpenko stated that Ukrainian forces need hundreds of artillery systems, including infantry fighting vehicles and tanks, as Ukrainian forces have suffered 30% to 50% equipment losses in active combat.<sup>[5]</sup> Sharapov and Karpenko noted that Ukrainian forces need Predator drones and loitering munitions to accurately strike Russian forces. Sharapov and Karpenko also asked for long-range precision weapons such as MLRS to defend the entire 2,500 km frontline in Ukraine.

**Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces have already committed about 330,000 servicemen to their invasion of Ukraine without conducting partial or full-scale mobilization in Russia.** Ukrainian General Staff Main Operations Deputy Chief Oleksiy Gromov stated that Russian

forces grouped 150,000 servicemen into battalion tactical groups (BTGs) and other formations and involved additional 70,000 troops from air and sea elements, with the remaining personnel staffing non-combat support units.<sup>[6]</sup> Gromov noted that Russian forces committed more than 80,000 servicemen of the mobilized reserve, up to 7,000 reservists of the Russian Combat Army Reserve (BARS-2021), up to 18,000 members of the Russian National Guard (Rosguardia), and up to 8,000 troops from private military companies. Gromov did not specify if Ukrainian officials included information about forcibly mobilized servicemen in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) in these numbers. Gromov noted that the Kremlin may still increase the number of Russian military personnel in Ukraine by executing covert or full mobilization.<sup>[7]</sup> Gromov noted that while it is unknown if the Kremlin will declare mobilization, Russian forces will still need time to execute the deployment and training of the new personnel whether or not the Kremlin announces full mobilization.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to launch ground assaults on Severodonetsk and settlements along the Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Lysychansk. Ukrainian military intelligence reported that Russian forces are no longer operating as concrete battalion tactical groups (BTGs), as ISW previously assessed.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations northwest of Slovyansk, while Ukrainian forces reportedly resumed preparations for counteroffensives west of Izyum.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces engaged in clashes north and northeast of Kharkiv City, though no significant territory changed hands.
- Russian forces continued to fortify fallback positions in northwestern Kherson Oblast, likely in anticipation of Ukrainian counteroffensives in the region.
- Head of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Denis Pushilin continued to discuss and sign patronage agreements with Russian regional officials.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, and Grace Mappes

June 15, 6pm ET

**Western officials announced additional military aid for Ukraine on June 15.** US President Joe Biden pledged \$1 billion worth of military aid, including coastal defense weapons, advanced rocket systems, artillery, and ammunition to support Ukrainian operations. NATO members additionally announced they will additionally continue to provide Ukraine with heavy weapons and long-range systems and plan to agree on a new assistance package after consultations with Ukraine's Defense Ministry. This newest round of military aid will be invaluable to support Ukrainian operations, especially in the face of increasingly protracted and artillery-heavy fighting against Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine, though Ukraine will require further sustained support.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces launched ground assaults in Severodonetsk and settlements in its vicinity but have not taken full control over the city as of June 15.
- Russian forces launched largely unsuccessful offensive operations around the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway in an effort to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Lysychansk.
- Russian forces continued efforts to advance along the E40 highway to Slovyansk and southeast of Izyum.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to fight in northeastern settlements around Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces continued to fortify fallback positions in Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts, while undertaking defensive measures to strengthen Russian presence in the Black Sea.
- The Kremlin and proxy republics continue to pursue ad hoc annexation policies in occupied territories.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Grace Mapes

June 14, 5:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Belarusian Armed Forces began a command-staff exercise focused on testing command and control capabilities on June 14. However, Belarus remains unlikely to join the war in Ukraine on behalf of Russia. Head of Logistics for the Belarusian Armed Forces Major General Andrei Burdyko announced that the exercise will involve military authorities, unspecified military units, and logistics organizations and is intended to improve the coherency of command-and-control and logistics support to increase the overall level of training and practical skills of personnel in a "dynamically changing environment."<sup>[1]</sup> Despite the launch of this exercise, Belarus remains unlikely to join the war in Ukraine due to the threat of domestic unrest that President Alexander Lukashenko faces if he involves already-limited Belarusian military assets in combat.<sup>[2]</sup> Any Belarusian entrance into the war would also likely provoke further crippling sanctions on Belarus. Any unsupported Belarusian attack against northern Ukraine would likely be highly ineffective, and the quality of Belarusian troops remains low. ISW will continue to monitor Belarusian movements but does not forecast a Belarusian entrance into the war at this time.

**Russian authorities may be accelerating plans to annex occupied areas of Ukraine and are arranging political and administrative contingencies for control of annexed territories.** Russian military correspondent Sasha Kots posted an image of a map that was displayed at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum depicting a proposed scheme for the "administrative-territorial" division of Ukraine following the war on a three-to-five-year transition scale.<sup>[3]</sup> The proposed scheme divides Ukrainian oblasts into Russian "territorial districts" and suggests the manner in which Russian authorities hope to incorporate Ukrainian territory directly into Russia. Advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol Petro Andryushchenko additionally outlined a series of indicators that he claimed suggest that Russian authorities are planning to annex occupied Donetsk Oblast as soon as September 1, 2022.<sup>[4]</sup> Andryushchenko stated that the leadership of occupied Donetsk has entirely passed from authorities of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) to Russian officials and that Russian educational authorities are already referring to Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson as regions of Russia. Andryushchenko additionally stated that the financial and legal systems in occupied Donetsk have already transitioned to Russian systems. Despite the apparent lack of a Kremlin-backed mandate concerning the condition of occupied areas, Russian authorities are likely pushing to expedite a comprehensive annexation process in order to consolidate control over Ukrainian territories and integrate them into Russia's political and economic environment. However, the Kremlin retains several options in occupied Ukrainian territory and is not bound to any single annexation plan.

**The Russian military leadership continues to expand its pool of eligible recruits by manipulating service requirements.** Russian milblogger Yuri Kotylenok suggested that Russian authorities are preparing to increase the age limit for military service from 40 to 49 and to drop the existing requirement for past military service to serve in tank and motorized infantry units.<sup>[5]</sup> If true, the shift demonstrates the Kremlin's increasing desperation for recruits to fill frontline units, regardless of their poor skills. Kotylenok echoed calls made by other milbloggers to reduce the health requirements for those serving in rear and support roles.<sup>[6]</sup> Kotylenok additionally noted that while Russian recruits must have clean criminal records to serve, private military companies such as the Wagner Group will allow those with "mild misdemeanors" into service and that many of these low-level offenders have been mobilized into combat with Wagner in Donetsk and Luhansk. The Russian military leadership will likely continue efforts to expand the pool of eligible recruits, even at the cost of high-quality military personnel.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian military authorities are pursuing options to increase the available pool of eligible recruits to account for continued personnel losses in Ukraine.
- Russian forces are continuing to fight for control of the Azot industrial plant and have destroyed all bridges between Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, likely to isolate the remaining Ukrainian defenders within the city from critical lines of communication.
- Russian forces continue to prepare for offensive operations southeast of Izyum and west of Lyman toward Sloviansk.

- Russian forces are continuing offensive operations to the east of Bakhmut near the T1302 highway to cut Ukrainian lines of communication to Severodonetsk-Lysychansk.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations to push Ukrainian troops away from frontlines northeast of Kharkiv City.
- Ukrainian counterattacks have forced Russian troops on the Southern Axis to take up and strengthen defensive positions.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Grace Mappes

June 13, 7:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Kremlin-sponsored outlet Izvestia published and quickly removed an appeal by the First Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Kirelenko for Russia to rebuild the Donbas on June 12 and blamed hackers for what they (likely falsely) claimed was a “fake publication.” Izvestia likely intended to save the article for a later date to set informational conditions for Russian annexation of Donbas. Kirelenko’s appeal stated that Russia will restore the Donbas regardless of high costs or if doing so lowers the standard of living in Russia.<sup>[1]</sup> Izvestia blamed unknown hackers for publishing a “fake article,” but it is possible that hackers instead released an article Izvestia had prepared to publish at a later date. The Kremlin previously published and removed an article prematurely celebrating a Russian victory over Ukraine in late February and discussing the capture of Ukraine in past tense in anticipation of Ukraine’s capitulation during the first Russian-Ukrainian negotiations in Belarus.<sup>[2]</sup> Unnamed Kremlin officials previously identified Kirelenko as the future head of a new Russian federal district, which would encompass Donbas, and occupied settlements in Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Russia continues to deploy insufficiently prepared volunteer and reserve forces to reinforce its ongoing operations.** Kremlin-sponsored outlet Izvestia released footage showing Russian artillery reservists undergoing training with old D-20 howitzers reportedly within 10 days of their deployment to Ukraine.<sup>[4]</sup> The reservists focused on learning how to operate hand-held weapons, despite being reportedly only days away from deploying. Social media footage also showed Russian forces transporting Russian volunteer and reserve units with T-80BV tanks (a variant produced in 1985, as opposed to the modernized T-80 BVM operated by the 1st Guards Tank Army) and BMP-1 armored personnel carriers (which have largely been phased out in favor of the BMP-2) to Belgorod Oblast on June 9.<sup>[5]</sup> Additional social media footage showed Russian forces transporting T-80BV tanks removed from storage in Moscow Oblast on June 9.<sup>[6]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces pushed Ukrainian defenders from the center of Severodonetsk and reportedly destroyed the remaining bridge from Severodonetsk to Lysychansk on June 13, but Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces are not encircled in the city.
- Russian forces carried out unsuccessful ground assaults in an attempt to sever Ukrainian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) near Popasna and Bakhmut.
- Russian forces launched unsuccessful offensive operations southeast of Izyum and north of Sloviansk, and are likely setting conditions for an assault on Siversk and northwestern Ukrainian GLOCs to Lysychansk.
- Russian forces are likely conducting a limited offensive directly northeast of Kharkiv City in a likely attempt to push Ukrainian forces out of artillery range of Russian rear areas and secured some successes.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces are engaging in ongoing fighting for Davydov Brid in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities likely staged terrorist activity in Melitopol and Berdyansk for Russia Day on June 12.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Grace Mappes

June 12, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces continue to struggle with generating additional combat-capable units.** The UK Ministry of Defense reported on June 12 that Russian forces have been trying to produce more combat units by preparing to deploy third battalion tactical groups (BTGs) from some units over the last few weeks.<sup>[1]</sup> The UK MoD noted that Russian brigades and regiments normally can generate two BTGs, but doing so leaves the parent units largely hollow shells. The UK MOD concluded that these third BTGs will likely be understaffed and rely on recruits and mobilized reservists. Their deployment will likely adversely impact the capacity of their parent units to regenerate their combat power for quite some time. BTGs generated in this fashion will not have the combat power of regular BTGs. It will be important not to overestimate Russian reserves produced in this way by counting these third BTGs as if they were normal BTGs.

**Pro-Russian sources are continuing to spread disinformation to sow anxiety and resentment among the Ukrainian population.** Russian Telegram channels reportedly began spreading a fake mobilization order on June 12 that they falsely attributed to the Ukrainian General Staff. The fake order called for the mobilization of all eligible Ukrainian women to report for duty by "June 31" (sic).

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued ground assaults in Severodonetsk and blew up bridges that connect Severodonetsk to Lysychansk across the Siverskyi Donets River in a likely attempt to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that run from Bakhmut to Lysychansk and Severodonetsk.
- Russian forces made incremental gains to the southeast of Izyum and will likely continue attempts to advance on Sloviansk from the northwest.
- Russian forces continued efforts to push Ukrainian troops back from contested frontlines northeast of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces focused on maintaining defensive lines along the Southern Axis.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 11

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, and George Barros

June 11, 6:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian intelligence assesses that the Russian military is extending its planning to fight a longer war, though Russian force generation and reserves likely remain poor.** Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky stated the GUR received confirmed information that Russian forces have extended their war planning for the next 120 days, extending to October 2022.<sup>[1]</sup> Skibitsky said that Russian forces will adjust the plan depending on their successes in Donbas and noted that the Russian General Staff is modifying their invasion plans almost every month.<sup>[2]</sup> Skibitsky's statement likely indicates the Kremlin has, at a minimum, acknowledged it cannot achieve its objectives in Ukraine quickly and is further adjusting its military objectives in an attempt to correct the initial deficiencies in the invasion of Ukraine. Skibitsky also claimed that Russian forces have an additional 40 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in reserve, after having already deployed 103 BTGs to Ukraine. This report is highly unlikely to mean Russian forces retain 40 full-strength and effective BTGs in Russia. At most, these "BTGs" are likely small collections of personnel cobbled together from other units. The Russian military is additionally unlikely to be

holding such a significant portion of its force in reserve due to continuing manpower shortages in existing frontline units.

**Ukrainian officials continued to increase their requests for Western offensive and defensive equipment, particularly regarding capabilities necessary to combat Russian artillery superiority.** Head of the Ukrainian Northern Operational Command Dmytro Krasilnikov reported that Ukrainian forces are experiencing a shortage in long-range artillery systems, while Russian artillery continues to overpower Ukrainian infantry. Ukrainian Advisor to Cabinet of Ministers Oleksandr Danylyuk stated that Russian forces adopted a new unspecified strategy that allows them to make more careful maneuvers.<sup>[3]</sup> Danylyuk added that Russian forces have more resources than Ukraine, which would prove advantageous in a protracted conflict. Severodonetsk Mayor Oleksandr Stryuk said that Ukrainian defenders need long-range artillery and air defense systems to strike against advancing Russian troops in Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian forces will need consistent Western support, particularly regarding artillery systems, as Russian numbers and resources take their toll on Ukrainian forces in increasingly positional warfare.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to conduct ground offensives within the Severodonetsk area, but Ukrainian defenders retain control of the industrial area of the city as of June 11.
- Russian forces likely resumed efforts to cut the T1303 Hirske-Lysychansk highway and launched failed assaults on settlements along the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychank highway.
- Russian forces continued assaults on settlements southwest and southeast of Izum in an effort to resume drives on Sloviansk.
- Ukrainian forces likely resumed counteroffensives northwest of Kherson City on June 11, south of their previous operations.
- Russian occupation officials distributed the first batch of Russian passports in Kherson City and Melitopol.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 10

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

June 10, 4:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian officials are increasing the urgency of their requests for more-sophisticated Western-provided weapons systems amid reports of growing Russian artillery superiority.** Several Western media outlets reported in the last 48 hours that Ukrainian military and government officials are increasingly highlighting the fact that Ukrainian troops are trapped in an “artillery war” on critical frontlines and are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of artillery systems.<sup>[1]</sup> Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky stated that Russian troops possess 10 to 15 artillery pieces to every one Ukrainian artillery piece and that Ukrainian forces have almost completely exhausted their artillery ammunition.<sup>[2]</sup> Considering the current prevalence of protracted positional battles, especially in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area, Ukrainian forces urgently need fresh supplies of artillery systems. As Ukrainian forces use the last of their stocks of Soviet-era weapon systems and munitions, they will require consistent Western support to transition to new supply chains of ammunition and key artillery systems. Effective artillery will be increasingly decisive in the largely static fighting in eastern Ukraine.

**Russian military authorities continue to struggle with force generation and are facing the consequences of aggressive forced mobilization efforts.** Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) claimed they captured a new group of Russian prisoners of war who reportedly were recruited through a private military company and told they were going to be providing security services but were instead sent to the frontline in Luhansk.<sup>[3]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff similarly reported that units comprised of forcibly mobilized personnel are refusing to participate in combat in the Donbas due to high losses.<sup>[4]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) cited intercepted phone calls and claimed that Russian soldiers are refusing to fight and are being threatened with prosecution—despite their lack of equipment and weapons within their units.<sup>[5]</sup> Such reports are consistent with previous reports that Russian forced mobilization efforts are self-destructive and may result in mounting discontent and declining morale and discipline.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials are increasing the urgency of their requests for Western weapons systems due to Russia's artillery superiority.
- Russian forces are continuing ground assaults within Severodonetsk but have yet to secure full control of the city as of June 10.
- Russian forces are preparing to renew offensive operations toward Slovyansk and made minor gains to the north of the city.
- Russian forces are continuing efforts to cut the T1302 Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway and conducting assaults on settlements near the highway.
- Russian troops reportedly took control of the Kinburn Spit in the northern Black Sea, which will allow them to exert further control of the Black Sea coast.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 9

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

June 9, 6:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces are continuing to deploy outdated military equipment to Ukraine to replace losses.** The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on June 9 that Russian forces are mining Kherson Oblast with mines from the 1950s to defend against recent Ukrainian counterattacks in northwestern Kherson Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> The GUR stated that Russian forces moved these mines from Russia's Rostov Oblast to the Kherson area despite the fact the mines were meant to be destroyed. The GUR claimed that some of the mines detonated during the transportation processes and killed Russian sappers from the 49th Combined Arms Army. The GUR's report is consistent with previous statements that Russian forces are moving old and obsolete equipment to Ukraine to make up for equipment losses, including deploying T-62 tanks to the Melitopol area and pulling MLRS and 152mm howitzers from storage in Irkutsk, Siberia.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Russian military command continues to face pervasive issues with force generation.** The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Russian officials in Luhansk Oblast have had to reduce their mobilization efforts due to widespread protests against aggressive mobilization efforts that have taken a toll on the labor market in Luhansk.<sup>[3]</sup> Attacks on Russian military recruitment offices are additionally continuing.<sup>[4]</sup> An unidentified assailant threw a Molotov cocktail at the military commissariat in Vladivostok, which is the eighteenth such reported attack on Russian territory since the beginning of the war. As Russian officials escalate mobilization efforts over the background of continued losses in Ukraine, they will continue to run the risk of instigating public dissent and pushback against such recruitment practices.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian officials are increasingly taking over governmental positions in occupied Ukrainian territory, advancing the Kremlin's likely efforts to annex occupied areas of Ukraine into Russia as an okrug (federal district).
- Russian forces continued to fight for the Azot industrial zone in Severodonetsk under the cover of heavy artillery fire.
- Russian forces made marginal gains north of Slovyansk but are likely to face difficulties assaulting the city itself because of the tactical challenges posed by crossing the Siverskyi Donets River.
- Russian forces made incremental advances to the east of Bakhmut and will continue efforts to cut Ukrainian lines of communication to the northeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces are likely engaged in limited fighting along occupied frontiers in northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian forces continue to focus on strengthening defensive lines along the Southern Axis and are intensifying ground attacks in northeastern Zaporizhia Oblast with the support of troop and equipment rotations.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

June 8, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces are escalating the use of psychological and information operations to damage the morale of Ukrainian soldiers.** The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on June 8 that Russian forces are sending threatening messages to the personal devices of Ukrainian servicemen calling on them to betray their service oaths, lay down their arms, surrender, or defect to Russia.<sup>[1]</sup> The GUR reported that Russian forces are sending messages on a variety of platforms including SMS, Telegram, Viber, Signal, and WhatsApp and that the messages use location information to threaten to harm Ukrainian soldiers or their family members. Ukrainian military expert Dmytro Snegirov additionally noted that Russian propagandists are conducting informational and psychological campaigns to spoil the morale of Ukrainian troops by disseminating information that the battle for Severodonetsk will become the "next Mariupol."<sup>[2]</sup> These information and psychological attacks likely seek to lower the morale of Ukrainian servicemen as operations on multiple axes of advance continue to generate high causalities on both the Ukrainian and Russian sides.

**Russian military commanders continue to face force generation challenges.** The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian military enlistment offices in Crimea are falsifying the results of mandatory medical exams administered during the summer conscription period to maximize the number of recruits.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian police also arrested a man who threw a molotov cocktail and set fire to a local Crimean administration building in protest of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, likely indicating growing discontent with Russian war efforts in Crimea.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW has previously reported that forced mobilization in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) is exacerbating social tensions and sparking protests in Donbas.<sup>[5]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that unspecified elements of the 106th and 76th Guards Airborne Assault Divisions refused to participate in combat in Luhansk Oblast and returned to Russia. The 76th Guards Airborne Assault Division previously participated in assaults on Kyiv, Izyum, and Popasna, which has likely led to the demoralization of troops.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces continued assaults against Ukrainian positions in Severodonetsk.** Russian forces simultaneously seek to outflank Ukrainian positions in the region to avoid the necessity of making an opposed crossing of the Siversky Donets river.
- **Russian forces are continuing operations around Sviatohirsk and west of Lyman to link up with operations southeast of Izyum and drive on Slovyansk.**
- **Russian forces are intensifying their operations in northwestern Kherson Oblast in response to recent Ukrainian counterattacks.**
- **Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast are focusing ground and artillery attacks near the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border and likely are seeking to strengthen control of the highway between Vasylivka-Orikhiv and Huliapole to support operations in northeast Zaporizhia.**
- **Russian-backed occupation authorities are attempting to set conditions for the political integration of occupied areas into the Russian Federation but are likely acting independently and in an incoherent manner due to the lack of a unifying occupation authority.**
- **Russian forces intensified psychological and information operations to degrade Ukrainian morale.**

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

June 7, 6:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces continued offensive operations in several locations in eastern Ukraine but did not secure any confirmed gains in ground assaults on June 7.** Russian forces have likely captured most of Severodonetsk, but ISW cannot confirm the exact control of terrain within the city.

[1] Russian forces additionally redeployed troops east of Bakhmut to renew offensives to secure access to highways northeast of Bakhmut and threaten Ukrainian lines of communication.[2] Russian troops north of Sloviansk will likely seek to advance toward Sloviansk and Kramatorsk from positions north of the city.[3] Russian forces on the Southern Axis are reportedly redeploying away from Zaporizhia Oblast toward Kherson Oblast, likely in order to support Russian defensive positions that have been threatened by Ukrainian counterattacks along the Mykolaiv-Kherson Oblast border south of Davydov Brid.[4]

**Members of the Russian military community are accusing Ukrainian forces of escalating artillery attacks on Russian rear areas in a likely attempt to dissuade further Western support to the Ukrainian military.** Former FSB agent Igor Girkin (also known as Strelkov) accused Ukrainian troops of perpetrating “terrorist attacks” against residential areas of Donetsk City, Horlivka, and Makiivka.[5] A Russian source additionally accused Ukrainian forces of firing on Shyroka Balka, Kherson Oblast.[6] Ukrainian social media users denied the claims and stated that they are likely false-flag attempts to spoil Western opinion of the Ukrainian military and halt military aid to the Ukrainian Armed Forces.[7]

**The Kremlin’s efforts to censor information about deceased military personnel and ongoing forced mobilization within the DNR and LNR are reportedly exacerbating domestic tensions and opposition to the war in Russia.** The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Kremlin assigned lawyers and psychologists to convince families of personnel of the sunken cruiser Moskva to refrain from disclosing any information regarding the deaths of their relatives in an effort to crush rising social tensions in Russia.[8] The GUR stated that the Kremlin is threatening to nullify financial compensation to the families of Moskva crew members if they publicly discuss the sinking of the cruiser, resulting in some relatives refusing to meet with Black Sea Fleet commanders in Sevastopol in protest. Ukrainian media sources separately reported that the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) altered mobilization protocols and is now promising compensation for wounded and deceased personnel due to DNR servicemen rioting at the frontlines.[9]

**Domestic Russian complaints about the maltreatment and lack of preparation among Russian combat forces are likely prompting the Kremlin to take rhetorical steps to curb discontent.** Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stated that new conscripts during the summer training period will be trained with specific attention to lessons learned so far in Ukraine during a meeting with the National Defense Management Center (NDCC) (the supreme command center of the Russian Armed Forces and Defense Ministry) on June 7. Shoigu added that summer conscripts will learn battlefield first aid, likely responding to criticisms by members of the Russian military community of poor tactics and lack of first aid acumen among Russian soldiers.[10] However, the Russian military is unlikely to properly train and equip Russian conscripts rushed to the front as replacements and likely primarily seeks to mollify public discontent. Former DNR Security Minister and milblogger Alexander Khodakovskiy claimed that he asked the DNR military command to move exhausted and demoralized proxy conscripts to auxiliary tasks away from the line of contact but to no avail.[11]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces have likely established control over the majority of the residential sector of Severodonetsk and conducted assaults against Ukrainian positions in the industrial zone in the past 24 hours. The operational environment within the city remains fluid.
- Russian forces continued efforts to advance on Sloviansk southeast from the Izyum area and west from Lyman, attempting to break through Ukrainian defenses that have halted most direct frontal assaults from Izyum.
- Russian forces are likely attempting to reinforce their operations in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area from both the Toshkivka-Ustynivka area in the south and Kupyansk from the northwest.
- Russian forces began withdrawing troops from positions in Zaporizhia Oblast, likely either to rotate damaged units into rear areas or to reinforce Russian defenses in northwestern Kherson Oblast, though ISW cannot currently confirm the destination of these forces.
- Russian forces failed to regain advanced positions on the western (now Ukrainian-occupied) bank of the Ihulets River on June 7.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that Russian forces restored transit connections between newly occupied cities and Crimea.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to face challenges suppressing Ukrainian resistance and finding partisan supporters despite increasingly draconian occupation measures and attempts to bribe Ukrainian civilians.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

June 6, 7:15 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The nature of urban combat in Severodonetsk is likely obfuscating reports of control of terrain within the city, though Russian forces likely retain control over much of the city. Head of the Luhansk Regional State Administration Serhiy Haidai claimed on June 5 that Ukrainian forces managed to retake large parts of Severodonetsk and push Russian forces to the outskirts of the city during successful urban counterattacks.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian journalist Yuri Butusov, however, denied Haidai's claims on June 5 and claimed that Ukrainian forces only control the Azot industrial sector of Severodonetsk. Haidai amended his claims on June 6 and reported that the situation in Severodonetsk has deteriorated significantly, adding that Ukrainian forces were indeed fighting within the Azot industrial site on June 6.<sup>[2]</sup> The reason for Haidai and Butusov's conflicting reports is unclear, and heavy urban fighting is ongoing in the city.

**Ukrainian naval forces are challenging Russian dominance over the northwestern part of the Black Sea and claimed to be preventing Russian warships from operating close to the shoreline.** The Ukrainian Navy reported on June 6 that they had succeeded in pushing a grouping of the Russian Black Sea Fleet more than 100 km away from the Ukrainian coast but did not specify a timeframe for this statement.<sup>[3]</sup> The report additionally stated that Russian naval forces have subsequently had to change their tactics in the Black Sea and are relying more heavily on Bal and Bastion coastal defense systems in occupied Kherson and Crimea rather than seaborne air defenses. The UK Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces have been strengthening their air defense assets on Snake Island, and the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense reported that Russian forces deployed additional S-300 air defense battalions to Crimea.<sup>[4]</sup> Taken together, these reports suggest that Ukrainian naval pressure and anti-ship missiles—likely including those provided by the UK and other states—have forced the Russian grouping in the northwestern Black Sea to rely more on coastal and air defense as they are pushed away from the Ukrainian shoreline. Ukraine will likely attempt to leverage these successes to alleviate the economic pressure of the Russian blockade on Ukraine's ports and seek additional economic support from the west, including possibly opening up new routes for international aid to Ukraine.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces likely retain control over most of Severodonetsk as of June 6, though the exact situation in the city remains unclear. Control of terrain is likely changing hands frequently.
- Russian forces in the Izyum area did not make any confirmed advances, while forces advancing west from Lyman secured minor gains.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful attempts to sever Ukrainian lines of communication northeast of Bakhmut.
- Limited and localized Ukrainian counterattacks on June 5 forced Russian troops to focus on holding defensive lines north of Kharkiv City on June 6.
- Russian occupation authorities are advancing efforts to issue Russian passports to Ukrainian citizens and cement their control over occupied territories.
- The Ukrainian Navy claimed to have pushed the Russian Black Sea Fleet more than 100 km from the Ukrainian coast, likely to reduce the pressure of the Russian blockade on Ukraine's southern ports.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 5

[Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros](#)

June 6, 5:15 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces continued to conduct limited and localized but successful counterattacks against Russian positions throughout Ukraine on June 5, including retaking large areas of Severodonetsk—the city in Luhansk Oblast the Kremlin has concentrated the majority of its forces on capturing.** A Russian Telegram channel claimed that Ukrainian troops launched a counterattack north of Kharkiv City, indicating that Ukrainian forces continue to pressure Russian defensive lines near the Russian border.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian forces are likely seeking to leverage the continued Russian focus on Severodonetsk to conduct counterattacks on other axes of advance. Even as Russian forces continue to pour equipment and troops into the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area, Ukrainian forces have conducted a successful counterattack in Severodonetsk in the last 48 hours and pushed Russian troops back to the eastern outskirts of the city and out of southern settlements.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian counteroffensive pressure will likely continue to draw the attention of Russian forces to Luhansk Oblast and therefore leave vulnerabilities in Russian defensive efforts in Kharkiv Oblast and along the Southern Axis. The ability of Ukrainian forces to successfully counterattack in Severodonetsk, the Kremlin's current priority area of operations, further indicates the declining combat power of Russian forces in Ukraine.

**Ukrainian forces reportedly killed Russian Major General Roman Kutuzov on June 5.** Russian Telegram channels reported that Kutuzov was killed near Mykolaivka, Luhansk Oblast (near Popasna) on June 5.<sup>[3]</sup> Kutuzov likely commanded the Donetsk People's Republic's 1st Army Corps at the time of his death, though ISW cannot confirm his exact position.<sup>[4]</sup> Some sources reported that Kutuzov commanded the 5th Combined Arms Army (CAA) at the time of his death, but we assess this is likely incorrect—Kutuzov served as acting commander of the 5th CAA from 2017 to 2019, and Major General Alexei Vladimirovich Podilov currently commands the 5th CAA.<sup>[5]</sup> High-level Russian commanders have taken remarkably high losses during combat in Ukraine, and will likely continue to do so as the Russian command continues to deploy military leadership directly to the frontline. Kutuzov's death has not yet been confirmed but would be at least the seventh death of a general in Ukraine since the beginning of the war.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Russian forces conducted their first missile strike against Kyiv in over a month on June 5.** Advisor to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense Vadym Denysenko stated that Russian forces fired five X-22 cruise missiles from a Tu-95 aircraft at Kyiv from the direction of the Caspian Sea that hit the Darnytsia Rail Car Repair Plant on the outskirts of Kyiv.<sup>[7]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that this strike targeted T-72 tanks supplied to Ukraine by other Eastern European countries, but images of the target area confirm that the missiles hit the Darnytsia plant.<sup>[8]</sup> It is unclear if Russian forces intended to strike foreign-provided Ukrainian tanks and missed, or if the Kremlin is attempting to obfuscate its intended target. This attack on Kyiv likely indicates that Russian forces are continuing to target Ukrainian infrastructure in non-critical areas of Ukraine in order to disrupt Ukrainian logistics as Russian forces take considerable losses in Donbas.

**Russian military bloggers continued to reckon with overarching struggles in Russian force generation on June 5.** Russian milblogger Alexander Khodakovsky accused "screamers in the guise of patriots" of hypocritically calling for general mobilization while at the same time discrediting the Russian military leadership and driving away those who would voluntarily take up arms for Russia.<sup>[9]</sup> Khodakovsky blamed the pervasive public discourse on general mobilization for making people overthink and subsequently become less willing to enter military service, thereby forcing Russian military command closer to actually needing to announce general mobilization. Khodakovsky suggested that this discourse is setting Russia up for a long war in Ukraine and that Russian authorities have been positioned to take the blame for losses. Russian war journalist Alexander Sladkov claimed that the Russian grouping in Ukraine is an "exclusively professional army" not staffed by conscripts, while simultaneously calling for the removal of health requirements for rear and combat specialties in order to mobilize those who should be medically disqualified.<sup>[10]</sup> These and other comments by Russian military specialists indicate the Russian military community is increasingly aware of issues in sustaining mobilization efforts and different actors are seeking to apportion blame as Russian operations continue to stall.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian counterattacks in Severodonetsk recaptured large parts of the city and forced Russian troops out of the southern suburbs of the city.**
- **Russian forces continued efforts to converge on Slovyansk from the southeast of Izyum and west of Lyman but remain unlikely to make notable advances around Slovyansk due to their continued prioritization of Severodonetsk.**
- **Ukrainian troops reportedly conducted limited and localized counterattacks north of Kharkiv City.**
- **Russian forces continued to hold their defensive lines and fire at Ukrainian positions along the Southern Axis.**

- Ukrainian forces likely killed Russian Major General Roman Kutuzov near Popasna.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, and George Barros

June 4, 6:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces are successfully slowing down Russian operations to encircle Ukrainian positions in Luhansk Oblast as well as Russian frontal assaults in Severodonetsk through prudent and effective local counterattacks in Severodonetsk and their defense of the western Siverskyi Donets riverbank. Ukrainian officials reported on June 3 that Ukrainian defenders pushed back against Russian advances in Severodonetsk and are actively hindering Russian advances on Lysychansk from the southwest.<sup>[1]</sup> Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai disagreed with the UK Defense Ministry forecast on June 3 that Russian forces will seize the remaining 10% of the oblast in the next two weeks, claiming that Ukrainian forces have enough reinforcements and equipment to conduct further counterattacks and defend their positions.<sup>[2]</sup> Haidai noted that Russian forces wrongfully believe in their own successes, enabling Ukrainian defenders to inflict high losses against unsuspecting Chechen units. Pro-Russian milblogger Voenkor Kotylenok Z claimed that Russian forces are unlikely to break through Ukrainian defenses in Lysychansk from Severodonetsk (through continued frontal assaults and an opposed crossing of the Siverskyi Donets River) and will likely need to complete the drive from Popasna if they hope to capture Lysychansk.<sup>[3]</sup> Voenkor Kotylenok Z claimed that Ukrainian forces could prevent Russian river crossings from Severodonetsk and highlighted that Russian forces have not yet secured access to two key highways to Lysychansk.

The Ukrainian government and military are furthermore discussing the battle of Severodonetsk in increasingly confident terms and are likely successfully blunting the Russian military's major commitment of reserves to the grinding battle for the city. While Russian forces may still be able to capture Severodonetsk and Lysychansk and Ukrainian forces are likely more degraded than Haidai's statements imply, Ukrainian defenses remain strong in this pivotal theater. The Russian military has concentrated all of its available resources on this single battle to make only modest gains. The Ukrainian military contrarily retains the flexibility and confidence to not only conduct localized counterattacks elsewhere in Ukraine (such as north of Kherson) but conduct effective counterattacks into the teeth of Russian assaults in Severodonetsk that reportedly retook 20% of the city in the last 24 hours. The Ukrainian government's confidence in directly stating its forces can hold Severodonetsk for more than two weeks and willingness to conduct local counterattacks, rather than strictly remaining on the defensive, is a marked shift from Ukrainian statements as recently as May 28 that Ukrainian forces might withdraw from Severodonetsk to avoid encirclement.<sup>[4]</sup>

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov reiterated on June 3 that Russia will continue its "special military operation" in Ukraine until Russia achieves all of its objectives.<sup>[5]</sup> Peskov noted that Russia has already "liberated" many settlements since the start of the operation. Kremlin officials have begun steadily returning to their original claims about the successes of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in contrast to previous statements in late May explaining the slow pace of the war.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu also claimed on June 3 that Russian forces are adopting new unspecified tasks to accelerate the progress of the war.<sup>[7]</sup> The Kremlin is likely setting conditions to announce some sort of victory in eastern Ukraine while preparing for a protracted war. The Kremlin has not abandoned its maximalist political goals for Ukraine even though it has been forced to revise downward its immediate military objectives.

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces conducted successful local counterattacks in Severodonetsk and Russian progress in direct assaults on the city and wider operations to encircle it remain slow. Ukrainian defenses in eastern Ukraine remain effective.
- Russian forces launched a series of unsuccessful offensive operations southwest of Izyum and in the Lyman area.
- Russian forces continued to defend previously occupied positions around Kharkiv City and launched missile and artillery strikes against Ukrainian defenders.

- Russian forces did not attempt to launch assaults on settlements in Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblast but continued to fire at Ukrainian positions throughout southern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin faces rising partisan activity in southern Ukraine despite Russian efforts to restrict movement and telecommunications access.
- Ukrainian officials are continuing negotiations for a prisoner exchange of the captured Mariupol defenders.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 3

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, and George Barros

June 3, 7:30 pm ET

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed that Russian forces will “accelerate” the “special military operation” in Ukraine in a meeting with Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov on June 3, though Russian forces are unlikely to be able to do so. Kadyrov said that Shoigu has “identified new tasks” that will improve the effectiveness of Russian offensive maneuvers and improve Russian tactics.<sup>[1]</sup> Kadyrov did not specify which tasks Russian forces will undertake to speed up their pace. Shoigu previously claimed on May 24 that Russian forces were making slow progress in eastern Ukraine to avoid civilian casualties.<sup>[2]</sup> In a retrospective on the 100th day of the war, the UK Defense Ministry stated that Russian forces will likely establish control over Luhansk Oblast in the next two weeks, though only at significant further cost.<sup>[3]</sup> The UK Defense Ministry further noted that Russian forces on all other axes have gone over to defensive operations to concentrate all available forces in Severodonetsk, and stated Russia will need to commit sizable investment of manpower and equipment—that it will be unable to generate quickly, if at all—to advance beyond Luhansk Oblast.

A Russian milblogger published a lengthy message on June 3 claiming that nearly the entire **35th Combined Arms Army has been destroyed in Izyum due to incompetent Russian commanders.** A Russian milblogger under the pseudonym Boytsovyi Kot Murz said that Russian commanders did not account for combat challenges in the Izyum woods, leading to significant losses in the 64th and 38th Separate Guard Motor Rifle Brigades, which he reported now have less than 100 servicemen in total.<sup>[4]</sup> Boytsovyi Kot Murz claimed that Russian commanders failed to provide necessary equipment to units fighting in wooded terrain and did not repair Russian heavy artillery in a timely manner. Russian forces also reportedly lacked effective communication with command centers and relied on messengers due to the shortage of encrypted phones. Boytsovyi Kot Murz noted that the lack of communications between Russian units and commanders allowed Ukrainian forces to strike Russian advanced positions with drones. Russian private military company servicemen from Wagner also refused to participate in combat, leading to a significant lack of advances on the Izyum axis. While ISW cannot independently confirm these reports, they are consistent with previous reports of Russian operations and high casualties on the Izyum axis.

**Russian and proxy forces reportedly have not sufficiently prepared frontline units with medical supplies, leading to abysmal medical care.** Boytsovyi Kot Murz criticized the Russian Defense Ministry for failing to prepare medical equipment and field hospitals for wounded servicemen.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian commanders reportedly failed to learn lessons from the lack of medical equipment during the Battle of Debaltseve in 2015 and are repeating similar mistakes. Boytsovyi Kot Murz claimed that Russian forces do not provide frontline troops with high pressure bandages and other supplies necessary to address limb injuries in time. Boytsovyi Kot Murz compared expired and underprepared Russian first aid kits to higher quality Ukrainian supplies and claimed that Russian forces do not have volunteer support that could address the shortages in military equipment. Boytsovyi Kot Murz noted that only Russian infantry, that he claimed has been defeated, had necessary medical training—while newly recruited reservists are incapable of providing first aid. Boytsovyi Kot Murz said that Russian medics are conducting an unnecessary number of limb amputations due to the lack medical equipment provided by the Russian Defense Ministry. These claims are consistent with past reports of poor Russian medical care in frontline units, and these conditions are likely a major contributing factor to Russian demoralization and the growing refusal of servicemen to return to frontline units.

**Ukrainian forces report that Russian electronic warfare (EW) units are increasingly threatening Ukrainian air reconnaissance in eastern Ukraine.** Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are increasingly jamming all possible signals and hindering Ukrainian drone operations.<sup>[6]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff has previously reported that Russian forces intensified EW operations in

Donbas, likely in an effort to obstruct Ukrainian aerial reconnaissance and drone strikes on Russian units.[7]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful assaults southeast and southwest of Izyum and west of Lyman but remain unlikely to secure major advances towards Slovyansk.
- Russian forces made minor gains in the eastern part of Severodonetsk, but Ukrainian forces continue to launch localized counterattacks in Severodonetsk and its outskirts.
- Russian forces did not attempt to launch assaults on Avdiivka.
- Russian forces failed to regain lost positions in northeastern Kherson Oblast and continued to defend previously occupied positions.
- Russian occupation authorities began issuing Russian passports in Kherson City and Melitopol, though they continue to face challenges establishing societal control over occupied territories and ending Ukrainian partisan actions.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, and George Barros

June 2, 6:15pm ET

**Russian forces continued to make incremental, grinding, and costly progress in eastern Ukraine on June 2.** Russian troops continued operations to capture Severodonetsk and further operations to capture Lysychansk. Russian military leadership will likely use the capture of these two cities to claim they have “liberated” all of Luhansk Oblast before turning to Donetsk Oblast but Russian forces are unlikely to have the forces necessary to take substantial territory in Donetsk Oblast after suffering further losses around Severodonetsk. Russian forces are evidently limited by terrain in the Donbas and will continue to face challenges crossing the Siverskyi Donets River to complete the encirclement of Severodonetsk-Lysychansk and make further advances westward of Lyman towards Slovyansk via Raihorodok.[1]

**Russian military leadership continues to experience complications with sufficient force generation and maintaining the morale of mobilized personnel.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Donetsk People’s Republic’s (DNR) 1st Army Corps, under Russia’s 8th Combined Arms Army, is conducting forced mobilization in occupied areas of Donetsk Oblast.[2] Russian forced mobilization is highly unlikely to generate meaningful combat power and will exacerbate low morale and poor discipline in Russian and proxy units. The 113th Regiment of the DNR posted a video appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin on June 2 wherein forcibly-mobilized soldiers complain they have spent the entire war on the frontline in Kherson without food or medicine, and that mobilization committees did not conduct requisite medical screenings and admitted individuals whose medical conditions should have disqualified them from service.[3] Ukraine’s Main Intelligence Directorate additionally released an intercepted phone conversation wherein DNR soldiers similarly complained that physically unfit individuals were forced into service and that mobilized units are experiencing mass drunkenness and general disorder.[4] Russian forces are additionally struggling to successfully rotate servicemen in and out of combat. Spokesperson for the Odesa Military Administration Maksym Marchenko stated that 30 to 40% of Russian personnel that rotated out of Ukraine refused to return, forcing Russian commanders to send unprepared and unmotivated units back into combat.[5] This is consistent with complaints made by DNR servicemen that rotation practices are contributing to poor morale and dissatisfaction within units that have been forcibly mobilized.[6]

**Russian occupation authorities continue to face challenges establishing permanent societal control in newly occupied Ukrainian territories.** The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Russian occupational administrations “are [only] created on paper” and are incapable of controlling local populations, enforcing the use of the Russian ruble, or conducting bureaucratic processes. [7] The Ukrainian Resistance Center noted that Ukrainian civilians welcome partisan activity that systematically sabotages Russian occupation rule.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian operations to advance on Slovyansk from the southeast of Izyum and west of Lyman continue to make little progress and are unlikely to do so in the coming days, as

- Russian forces continue to prioritize Severodonetsk at the expense of other axes of advance.
- Russian forces continued assaults against Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in order to claim full control of Luhansk Oblast.
  - Russian forces made incremental advances around Avdiivka.
  - Ukrainian counteroffensives in northwestern Kherson Oblast pushed Russian forces to the eastern bank of the Ihulets River and will likely continue to disrupt Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) along the T2207 highway.
  - The Kremlin continued to pursue inconsistent occupational measures in southern Ukraine, indicating both widespread Ukrainian resistance and likely Kremlin indecision on how to integrate occupied territory.

## [Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 1](#)

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

June 1, 5:30pm ET

The Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast has gotten the attention of Russian forces in the area, and the Russians are scrambling to secure the vital ground line of communication (GLOC) the Ukrainians have threatened. Ukrainian forces carried out a series of organized counterattacks targeting settlements on the eastern bank of the Ihulets River that are very close to a key highway supporting Russian forces further north. The Russians have responded by destroying the bridges the Ukrainians used in one of those counterattacks and other bridges across the river in an effort to hold their line against anticipated continued Ukrainian counter-offensive operations. Ukrainian forces are likely still close enough to the highway to disrupt its use as a main supply route, potentially undermining the Russians' ability to hold against Ukrainian counter-offensives from the north.

**Russian milbloggers are expressing growing alarm about the threat of Ukrainian counteroffensives in the areas Russian forces have deprioritized while concentrating on Severodonetsk.** Russian milbloggers have increasingly focused on tracking the rate of Ukrainian counterattacks in late May. Pro-Russian Telegram channel "Dmitriyev" (over 100,000 followers) reported that Ukrainian forces are fully capable of inflicting "painful and cutting blows" on Russian GLOCs in Kherson, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhia Oblasts by July-August due to lack of adequate Russian defensive forces in the areas. Former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer and milblogger Igor Girkin claimed that Ukrainian forces "will grope for weakness" in Russian defenses in Kherson Oblast. Russian milbloggers are effectively criticizing the Russian military command for endangering Russian territorial gains across other axes by prioritizing the Donbas offensive operation so heavily.

**Russian authorities are likely anticipating Ukrainian partisan pressure in Luhansk Oblast.** The Main Ukrainian Intelligence Directorate (GUR) announced on June 1 the launch of the "Luhansk partisan" project to galvanize resistance to Russian attempts to consolidate control of Luhansk Oblast. A Russian Telegram channel reported that the Russian Internal Ministry is sending a special detachment of its employees on "leave" to the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), which is a likely attempt to reinforce Russian administrative presence in the LNR in the face of growing internal and partisan discontent. The Ukrainian General Staff additionally stated that Russian forces moved a battalion tactical group (BTG) to Kupyansk, a Russian-controlled city in eastern Kharkiv Oblast along the P07 highway within 30 kilometers of the Luhansk Oblast administrative border. Kupyansk is far from the front lines and in no apparent danger of imminent Ukrainian conventional attack. Taken together, the reported deployment of Internal Ministry employees and a BTG suggest that Russian forces are anticipating partisan resistance against their attempts to gain control of Luhansk Oblast.

**Russian forces continue to undermine the economic viability of areas they are attempting to capture.** Russian forces reportedly hit the "Azot" fertilizer production plant in Severodonetsk on May 31 and caused the dissemination of toxic nitric acid smoke. The production plant was an economically-significant resource for Severodonetsk and the Luhansk region and it would have been prudent for Russian forces to maintain and take control of the plant's production capabilities. Russian forces similarly destroyed the Azovstal Steel Plant in Mariupol, which had considerable industrial significance for Ukraine and could have been economically exploited by Russian occupiers if they had not destroyed it. While the Azot plant in Severodonetsk was less productive on whole than Azovstal, its destruction is part of the systemic failure of Russian forces to take effective control of the economic and industrial capabilities of occupied territory. Russian forces will likely continue to destroy productive

infrastructure and continually undermine the economic benefits they could have hoped to gain from occupied territories.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces reportedly made incremental advances north of Slovyansk but likely have not yet been able to take control of the road into Slovyansk.
- Russian forces are attempting to advance towards Lysychansk from the south and west in order to avoid having to fight across the Siverskyi Donets River from Severodonetsk but are having limited successes so far.
- Russian troops made incremental gains north of Avdiivka.
- Russian troops reportedly destroyed Ukrainian-built bridges over the Inhulets River near Davydov Brid in response to Ukrainian counteroffensive pressure.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 31

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 31, 5:45pm ET

**Moscow's concentration on seizing Severodonetsk and Donbas generally continues to create vulnerabilities for Russia in Ukraine's vital Kherson Oblast, where Ukrainian counter-offensives continue.** Kherson is critical terrain because it is the only area of Ukraine in which Russian forces hold ground on the west bank of the Dnipro River. If Russia is able to retain a strong lodgment in Kherson when fighting stops it will be in a very strong position from which to launch a future invasion. If Ukraine regains Kherson, on the other hand, Ukraine will be in a much stronger position to defend itself against future Russian attack. This strategic calculus should in principle lead Russia to allocate sufficient combat power to hold Kherson. But Russian President Vladimir Putin has chosen instead to concentrate all the forces and resources that can be scraped together in a desperate and bloody push to seize areas of eastern Ukraine that will give him largely symbolic gains. Continuing successful Ukrainian counter-offensives in Kherson indicate that Ukraine's commanders recognize these realities and are taking advantage of the vulnerabilities that Putin's decisions have created.

**The Ukrainian leadership has apparently wisely avoided matching Putin's mistaken prioritization.** Kyiv could have committed more reserves and resources to the defense of Severodonetsk, and its failure to do so has drawn criticism.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian forces are now apparently withdrawing from Severodonetsk rather than fighting to the end—a factor that has allowed the Russians to move into the city relatively rapidly after beginning their full-scale assault.<sup>[2]</sup> Both the decision to avoid committing more resources to saving Severodonetsk and the decision to withdraw from it were strategically sound, however painful. Ukraine must husband its more limited resources and focus on regaining critical terrain rather than on defending ground whose control will not determine the outcome of the war or the conditions for the renewal of war.

**Sound Ukrainian prioritization of counter-offensive and defensive operations pushed the Russians almost out of artillery range of Kharkiv City and have stopped the Russian advances from Izyum—both of which are more important accomplishments than the defense of Severodonetsk.** Ukraine's leadership has had to make incredibly difficult choices in this war and has generally made the right ones, at least at the level of strategic prioritization and in the pace, scale, and ambitiousness of its counter-offensives. **That is why Ukraine still has a good chance to stop and then reverse the gains Russia is currently making.**

**Russian forces are likely attempting to exploit Belarusian equipment reserves to compensate for heavy material losses in Ukraine.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 31 that Belarusian forces are moving tanks and infantry fighting vehicles from storage facilities in Belarus to Russia to replenish combat losses.<sup>[3]</sup> This report corroborates previous reporting that Russian forces have largely exhausted their own reserves and indicates that the Kremlin is still leveraging its influence over Belarus in order to use Belarusian equipment.

**Some pro-Russian milbloggers began to capture the frustrating realities of limited warfare, which may further intensify societal tensions in Russia.** Pro-Russian political figure and self-proclaimed "People's Governor of Donetsk Oblast" Pavel Gubarev said that the limited mobilization of Russians for war has divided Russian society into two groups: a small proportion that is involved in the

war and the “peacetime Russians” who distance themselves from the war effort and are inconvenienced by foreign sanctions.<sup>[4]</sup> Gubarev blamed the “peacetime Russians” for failing to start collecting donations for Russian equipment, while criticizing the Kremlin for increasing propaganda about Russian successes during the “special military operation” in Ukraine. Gubarev also blamed the “peacetime Russians” for slowing down rotation rates due to fear of conscription. Gubarev noted that mass mobilization could resolve the divide in society but opined that Russian commanders will not order such a mobilization to avoid mass casualties of unprepared conscripts as occurred, he notes, in the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR).

Gubarev is accurately capturing a phenomenon that is normal in a limited war that nevertheless generates high casualties. Resentment by those fighting such a war and their families against those who are untouched by the horrors of combat can grow even in an all-volunteer professional military, as Western countries experienced during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It is likely to be even more pronounced in Russia, whose military relies so heavily on conscripts and involuntarily-recalled reservists. This resentment can erode morale and will to fight as well as the propensity to volunteer for military service.

**Russian citizens continued to conduct a series of attacks on Russian military recruitment centers in late May, likely in protest of covert mobilization.** Russian Telegram channel Baza reported that the Russian Federal Security Service arrested a former Moscow artist and opposition figure, Ilya Farber, for Molotov Cocktail attacks on military recruitment centers in Udmurtia in the Urals on May 21.<sup>[5]</sup> A Russian court had previously sentenced Farber to an eight-year prison sentence for a bribery case. The case gained Farber significant support from Russian opposition leaders.<sup>[6]</sup> Farber admitted to committing arson in court on May 30. Baza also reported two more attacks on recruitment centers in Simferopol and Tula Oblast on May 28 and May 31, respectively.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces are increasingly focused on advancing on Slovyansk from the southeast of Izum and west of Lyman.
- Russian forces are making gains within and around Severodonetsk.
- Russian forces are likely hoping to advance on Lysychansk from Toshkivka in order to avoid having to fight across the Severskyi Donets River from Severodonetsk.
- The Russian grouping in Kherson Oblast is likely feeling the pressure of the limited Ukrainian counteroffensive in northwestern Kherson Oblast, especially as much of the Russian operational focus is currently on the capture of Severodonetsk.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 30**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

May 30, 3:30pm ET

**Mounting casualties among Russian junior officers will likely further degrade Russian capabilities and lead to further morale breakdowns.** The UK Ministry of Defense stated on May 30 that Russian forces have suffered devastating losses amongst mid and junior ranking officers. The UK MoD reported that battalion and brigade level officers continue to deploy forwards and into harm's way—rather than commanding from rear areas and delegating to lower-ranking officers—due to senior Russian officers holding them to an “uncompromising level of responsibility” for their units.<sup>[1]</sup> The British Defense Ministry further reported that junior officers are in charge of low-level tactical operations due to a lack of professionalism and modernization within the Russian Armed Forces and that the continued losses of these junior officers will complicate command and control efforts, particularly in Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) cobbled together from the survivors of multiple other units.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW previously assessed that continued demoralization and poor command and control among Russian forces could present Ukrainian forces opportunities to conduct prudent counteroffensives, particularly as the Russian military continues to pour resources into the battle of Severodonetsk at the cost of other lines of effort.

**Domestic dissent within Russian military circles, claiming that the Kremlin is not doing enough to win the war, continues to grow.** Former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Igor Girkin (also known as Strelkov) condemned Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statements about the priority of the “special operation” in Ukraine being the liberation of the Donbas.<sup>[3]</sup> Girkin claimed that

the Kremlin has forgone the ideological underpinnings of the conflict by focusing the conflict on the Donbas, rather than the entirety of Ukraine. Girkin complained that Kremlin officials are no longer questioning the legitimacy of the existence of Ukraine and that the concepts of “denazification” and “demilitarization” have been forgotten. Girkin accused the Kremlin of appeasement policies and stated that the threat of defeat continues to grow.

Girkin’s dissent is emblematic of continued shifts within circles of Russian military enthusiasts and ex-servicemen. As ISW has previously reported, the Kremlin has repeatedly revised its objectives for the war in Ukraine downwards due to battlefield failures. The Kremlin is increasingly facing discontent not from Russians opposed to the war as a whole, but military and nationalist figures angry at Russian losses and frustrated with shifting Kremlin framing of the war. Russian officials are increasingly unable to employ the same ideological justifications for the invasion in the face of clear setbacks, and a lack of concrete military gains within Ukraine will continue to foment domestic dissatisfaction with the war.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to incrementally capture areas of Severodonetsk but have not yet fully encircled the city.
- Russian forces focused on regrouping near Izyum to renew offensives towards Slovyansk and Barvinkove and conducted only minor, unsuccessful, attacks. Russian forces are making incremental advances towards Slovyansk and seek to assault the city itself in the coming weeks, but are unlikely to achieve decisive gains.
- Russian forces in Kharkiv continue to focus efforts on preventing a Ukrainian counteroffensive from reaching the international border between Kharkiv and Belgorod, and Ukrainian forces have not conducted any significant operations in the area in recent days.
- The limited Ukrainian counterattack in northern Kherson Oblast did not take any further ground in the last 48 hours but has disrupted Russian operations. Russian forces launched several unsuccessful attacks against the Ukrainian bridgehead on the east bank of the Inhulets River.
- Mounting casualties among Russian junior officers will further degrade Russian morale and command and control capabilities.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

May 29, 5:30 pm ET

New reports confirmed that Ukrainian forces conducted a successful limited counterattack near the Kherson-Mykolaiv oblast border on May 28, forcing Russian forces onto the defensive. This Ukrainian counterattack is likely intended to disrupt Russian efforts to establish strong defensive positions along the Southern Axis. While the Ukrainian counterattack does not appear likely to retake substantial territory in the near term, it will likely disrupt Russian operations and potentially force Russia to deploy reinforcements to the Kholos region, which is predominantly held by sub-standard units. Ukrainian counterattacks may additionally slow Russian efforts to consolidate administrative control of occupied southern Ukraine.<sup>[1]</sup>

Russian forces continued to assault Severodonetsk on May 29 but did not make any confirmed advances; Russian progress in intense urban combat will likely be slow. The Russian campaign in eastern Ukraine—which previously aimed to capture the entirety of Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts—is now focused almost entirely on Severodonetsk. Russian troops are unlikely to be able to conduct multiple simultaneous operations and will likely further prioritize advances southeast of Izyum and west of Lyman in favor of concentrating available forces on Severodonetsk in the coming days.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued attempts to take full control of Severodonetsk.
- Russian forces continued offensives southeast of Izyum but did not make any confirmed advances toward Slovyansk.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) northeast of Bakhmut and appear unlikely to attempt to directly assault the city.

- The Ukrainian counteroffensive in northwestern Kherson Oblast has forced Russian troops to take up defensive positions and will likely disrupt Russian efforts to effectively dig in and consolidate control of occupied areas along the Southern Axis.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

May 28, 7:30pm ET

Russian President Vladimir Putin is inflicting unspeakable suffering on Ukrainians and demanding horrible sacrifices of his own people in an effort to seize a city that does not merit the cost, even for him.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that aimed to seize and occupy the entire country has become a desperate and bloody offensive to capture a single city in the east while defending important but limited gains in the south and east. Ukraine has twice forced Putin to define down his military objectives. Ukraine defeated Russia in the Battle of Kyiv, forcing Putin to reduce his subsequent military objectives to seizing Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine. Ukraine stopped him from achieving that aim as well, forcing him to focus on completing the seizure of Luhansk Oblast alone. Putin is now hurling men and munitions at the last remaining major population center in that oblast, Severodonetsk, as if taking it would win the war for the Kremlin. He is wrong. **When the Battle of Severodonetsk ends, regardless of which side holds the city, the Russian offensive at the operational and strategic levels will likely have culminated, giving Ukraine the chance to restart its operational-level counteroffensives to push Russian forces back.**

Russian forces are assaulting Severodonetsk even though they have not yet encircled it. They are making territorial gains and may succeed in taking the city and areas further west. The Ukrainian military is facing the most serious challenge it has encountered since the isolation of the Azovstal Plant in Mariupol and may well suffer a significant tactical defeat in the coming days if Severodonetsk falls, although such an outcome is by no means certain, and the Russian attacks may well stall again.

**The Russians are paying a price for their current tactical success that is out of proportion to any real operational or strategic benefit they can hope to receive.** Severodonetsk itself is important at this stage in the war primarily because it is the last significant population center in Luhansk Oblast that the Russians do not control. Seizing it will let Moscow declare that it has secured Luhansk Oblast fully but will give Russia no other significant military or economic benefit. This is especially true because Russian forces are destroying the city as they assault it and will control its rubble if they capture it. Taking Severodonetsk can open a Russian ground line of communication (GLOC) to support operations to the west, but the Russians have failed to secure much more advantageous GLOCs from Izyum partly because they have concentrated so much on Severodonetsk.

**The Russians continue to make extremely limited progress in their efforts to gain control of the unoccupied areas of Donetsk Oblast, meanwhile.** Russian troops have struggled to penetrate the pre-February 24 line of contact for weeks, while Russian offensive operations from Izyum to the south remain largely stalled. The seizure of Severodonetsk could only assist in the conquest of the rest of Donetsk Oblast if it gave the Russians momentum on which to build successive operations, but the Battle of Severodonetsk will most likely preclude continued large-scale Russian offensive operations.

**Russian progress around Severodonetsk results largely from the fact that Moscow has concentrated forces, equipment, and materiel drawn from all other axes on this one objective.** Russian troops have been unable to make progress on any other axes for weeks and have largely not even tried to do so. Ukrainian defenders have inflicted fearful casualties on the Russian attackers around Severodonetsk even so. Moscow will not be able to recoup large amounts of effective combat power even if it seizes Severodonetsk, because it is expending that combat power frivolously on taking the city.

**Ukrainian forces are also suffering serious losses in the Battle of Severodonetsk, as are Ukrainian civilians and infrastructure.** The Russians have concentrated a much higher proportion of their available offensive combat power to take Severodonetsk than the Ukrainians, however, shaping the attrition gradient generally in Kyiv's favor. The Ukrainians continue to receive supplies and materiel

from their allies as well, however slow and limited that flow may be. The Russians, in contrast, continue to manifest clear signs that they are burning through their available reserves of manpower and materiel with no reason to expect relief in the coming months.

**Evidence of eroding military professionalism in the Russian officer corps is mounting.** The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russian commanders are attempting to preserve military equipment by forbidding drivers from evacuating wounded servicemen or providing supplies to units that have advanced too far.<sup>[1]</sup> Refusing to risk equipment to evacuate wounded personnel on the battlefield—other than in extraordinary circumstances—is a remarkable violation of core principles of military professionalism. Such behavior can have serious impacts on morale and the willingness of soldiers to fight and risk getting injured beyond their own defensive lines. ISW cannot independently confirm the GUR's report, but commentary by Russian milbloggers offers some circumstantial support for it. Russian milblogger Alexander Zhychkovskiy criticized the Russian military command's disregard for reservists on the deprioritized Zaporizhia Oblast front. Zhychkovskiy reported that Russian commanders trapped lightly-equipped infantry units in areas of intense Ukrainian artillery fire without significant artillery support and did not rotate other units through those areas to relieve them.<sup>[2]</sup> Zhychkovskiy noted that Russian commanders are responsible for high losses and cases of insanity among servicemen. Another milblogger, Alexander Khodarkovsky, said that Russian commanders are not sending reinforcements in a timely matter, preventing Russian forces from resting between ground assaults.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Waning professionalism among Russia's officers could present Ukrainian forces with opportunities.** Russian morale, already low, may drop further if such behavior is widespread and continues. If Russian troops stuck on secondary axes lose their will to fight as the Battle for Severodonetsk consumes much of the available Russian offensive combat power, Ukraine may have a chance to launch significant counteroffensives with good prospects for success. That prospect is uncertain, and Ukraine may not have the ability to take advantage of an opportunity even if it presents itself, but the current pattern of Russian operations is generating serious vulnerabilities that Kyiv will likely attempt to exploit.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces pressed the ground assault on Severodonetsk and its environs, making limited gains.
- Russian forces in Kharkiv continue to focus efforts on preventing a Ukrainian counteroffensive from reaching the international border between Kharkiv and Belgorod.
- Ukrainian forces began a counteroffensive near the Kherson-Mykolaiv oblast border approximately 70 km to the northeast of Kherson City that may have crossed the Inhulets River.
- Russia's use of stored T-62 tanks in the southern axis indicates Russia's continued materiel and force generation problems.
- Ukrainian partisan activity continues to impose costs on Russian occupation forces in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko and Mason Clark

May 27, 7:30pm ET

**Russian forces began direct assaults on Severodonetsk on May 27 despite not yet having fully encircled the town.** Russian forces have performed poorly in operations in built-up urban terrain throughout the war to date and are unlikely to be able to advance rapidly in Severodonetsk itself. Russian forces continue to make steady and incremental gains around the city but have not yet encircled the Ukrainian defenders. Ukrainian forces continue to maintain defenses across eastern Ukraine and have slowed most Russian lines of advance. Russian forces will likely continue to make incremental advances and may succeed in encircling Severodonetsk in the coming days, but Russian operations around Izyum remain stalled and Russian forces will likely be unable to increase the pace of their advances.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces began direct assaults on built-up areas of Severodonetsk without having fully encircled the city and will likely struggle to take ground in the city itself.
- Russian forces in Lyman appear to be dividing their efforts—attacking both southwest to support stalled forces in Izyum and southeast to advance on Siversk; they will likely struggle to accomplish either objective in the coming days.
- Russian forces in Popasna seek to advance north to support the encirclement of Severodonetsk rather than advancing west toward Bakhmut.
- Positions northeast of Kharkiv City remain largely static, with no major attacks by either Russian or Ukrainian forces.
- Russian forces continue to fortify their defensive positions along the southern axis and advance efforts to integrate the Kherson region into Russian economic and political structures.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 26**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

May 26, 6:30pm ET

**Russian forces have made steady, incremental gains in heavy fighting in eastern Ukraine in the past several days, though Ukrainian defenses remain effective overall.** Deputy Ukrainian Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that the fighting is currently at its "maximum intensity" compared to previous Russian assaults and will likely continue to escalate.<sup>[1]</sup> Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Defense Ministry Oleksandr Motuzanyk characterized Russian gains as "temporary success" and stated that Ukrainian forces are using a maneuver defense to put pressure on Russian advances in key areas.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces have now taken control of over 95% of Luhansk Oblast and will likely continue efforts to complete the capture of Severodonetsk in the coming days.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces have made several gains in the past week, but their offensive operations remain slow. Russian forces are heavily degraded and will struggle to replace further losses.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance southeast of Izyum near the Kharkiv-Donetsk Oblast border.
- Russian forces continued steady advances around Severodonetsk and likely seek to completely encircle the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area in the coming days.
- Russian forces continued to make persistent advances south and west of Popasna toward Bakhmut, but the Russian pace of advance will likely slow as they approach the town itself.
- Russian forces in occupied areas of the Southern Axis are reportedly preparing a "third line of defense" to consolidate long-term control over the region and in preparation to repel likely future Ukrainian counteroffensives.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 25**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros

May 25, 7:15 pm ET

Some pro-Russian milbloggers on Telegram continued to criticize the Kremlin for appalling treatment of forcefully mobilized Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) servicemen—contradicting Russian information campaigns about progress of the Russian special military operation. Former Russian Federal Security Service officer Igor Girkin (also known by the alias Igor Strelkov) amplified a critique to his 360,000 followers from a smaller milblogger discussing a video wherein a DNR battalion appealed to DNR Head Denis Pushilin about maltreatment of forcefully mobilized forces.<sup>[1]</sup> The milblogger blamed Russian leadership, not Pushilin, for beginning the invasion with insufficient reserves and unprepared, forcefully mobilized forces. The

milblogger added that Russia did not provide the soldiers of its proxy republics with new weapons, despite claiming that Ukrainian forces prepared to attack occupied Donbas areas for a year prior to Russian invasion. The milblogger also claimed that the Kremlin failed to mobilize and adequately prepare the next batch of reserves, while Ukrainian forces are successfully preparing their troops for counteroffensives. Girkin also criticized the Kremlin for failing to pay the DNR battalion for three months. Some milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces staged the video, but the video still gathered attention of pro-Russian Telegram users.[2]

The incident highlights a continuing shift in the Russian-language milblogger information space regardless of the video's authenticity. Milbloggers would likely have either attacked or dismissed such a video loudly and in near-unison earlier in the war, when they all generally focused on presenting optimistic pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives. The response to this video in the Russian-language milblogger space demonstrates the strong resonance anti-Kremlin narratives can now have. It is impossible to know what effect this change in this information space might have on general perceptions of the war in Russia, but it is one of the most visible and noteworthy inflections in the attitudes of previously strongly pro-Kremlin ostensibly independent Russian voices speaking to Russians that we have yet seen.

Today's statement by DNR Militia Head Eduard Basurin explaining that Russian forces would focus on creating "smaller cauldrons" rather than on a single large encirclement is likely in part a response to a critique that surfaced both in the milblogger space and in the Russian Duma that Russian forces had failed to form and reduce "cauldrons" of the sort they used in 2014.[3] Basurin's statement, along with other changes in the ways in which Russian officials have spoken about cauldrons and Russian operations in the east following those critiques suggest that the Russian and proxy leadership is sensitive to shifts in this information space.[4]

**Russian forces are increasingly facing a deficiency in high-precision weaponry.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that due to an increasing lack of high-precision weapons Russian forces are seeking other methods of striking critical infrastructure and have intensified the use of aircraft to support offensives.[5] The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) noted that up to 60% of Russia's high-precision stockpile has already been exhausted, which is consistent with previous reports by Western defense officials that Russian forces have been increasingly relying on "dumb bombs" because they are facing challenges replenishing their supplies of precision munitions in part due to sanctions targeting Russia's defense-industrial production.[6] A lack of high-precision weapons will likely result in an increase in indiscriminate attacks on critical and civilian infrastructure.

**The Kremlin is attempting to expand the pool of Russian passport-holders in occupied areas.** Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on May 25 that will simplify the procedure for obtaining a Russian passport within Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts.[7] This renewed campaign of so-called "mass passportization" is occurring in occupied territories and likely represents an effort to set conditions for some sort of post-conflict political arrangement (the precise form of which Putin prefers remains unclear) through manipulating access to Russian citizenship.[8] Occupation authorities may additionally attempt to exploit this new decree to carry out covert mobilization in occupied areas, as having a Russian passport would make conscription-eligible residents of occupied territories subject to forced military service.

**The Kremlin and Russian military commanders are introducing new regulations aimed at addressing the diminishing level of combat-ready reserves.** The Russian State Duma and the Russian Federation Council passed a bill raising the maximum age for voluntary enlistment into the Russian military from 40 to 50.[9] Russian Telegram channels also reported that Russian leadership forced operational officers and commanders of the Russian Border Guards of southern Russian regions including Rostov Oblast and occupied Crimea to indefinitely cancel all summer vacations--a rather unsurprising step in light of the military situation in principle, but an indication of the next source of manpower to which Putin will apparently turn.[10] Russian Border Guards will reportedly deploy to training grounds for unspecified exercises in late May. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces are forming new reserve units within the Southern Military District.[11]

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces prioritized advances east and west of Popasna in order to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) southwest of Severodonetsk and complete encirclement efforts in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces have likely entered Lyman and may use this foothold to coordinate with advances southeast of Izyum to launch an offensive on Siversk.
- Russian forces may start the Battle of Severodonetsk prior to completely cutting off Ukrainian GLOCs southwest and northwest of Severodonetsk.

- Russian forces struck Zaporizhzhia City in an attempt to disrupt a key logistics hub for Ukrainian forces operating in the east.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

May 24, 7:00 pm ET

**Russian forces have likely abandoned efforts to complete a single large encirclement of Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine and are instead attempting to secure smaller encirclements—enabling them to make incremental measured gains.** Russian forces are likely attempting to achieve several simultaneous encirclements of small pockets of Ukrainian forces in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts: the broader Severodonetsk area (including Rubizhne and Lysychansk), Bakhmut-Lysychansk, around Zolote (just northeast of Popasna), and around Ukrainian fortifications in Avdiivka. Russian forces have begun steadily advancing efforts in these different encirclements daily but have not achieved any major “breakthroughs” or made major progress towards their stated objectives of securing the Donetsk Oblast borders or seizing all of Donbas. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Ukrainian forces only controlled approximately 10 percent of Luhansk Oblast as of May 15 (compared to 30 percent prior to the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022).<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces have secured more terrain in the past week than efforts earlier in May. However, they have done so by reducing the scope of their objectives—largely abandoning operations around Izyum and concentrating on key frontline towns: Russian performance remains poor.

**Russian forces will additionally likely face protracted urban combat if they successfully encircle Severodonetsk (as well as in other large towns like Bakhmut), which Russian forces have struggled with throughout the war.** Russian forces are committing a significant number of their troops, artillery, and aircraft to defeat Ukrainian defenders in Luhansk Oblast and are likely pulling necessary resources from the Izyum axis, defensive positions around Kharkiv City, Donetsk City, and the Zaporizhia area. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai has previously compared Ukrainian forces in Luhansk Oblast to the previous defenders of Mariupol, which aimed to wear out Russian forces and prevent further offensive operations.<sup>[2]</sup> The UK Defense Ministry also noted that a Russian victory over Severodonetsk will only worsen Russian logistical issues and extend Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs).<sup>[3]</sup> **Russian forces are making greater advances in the past week than throughout the rest of May—but these advances remain slow, confined to smaller objectives than the Kremlin intended, and face continued Ukrainian defenses; they do not constitute a major breakthrough.**

**Senior Kremlin officials are increasingly openly admitting that the Russian offensive in Ukraine is moving slower than anticipated and are grasping for explanations to justify the slow pace.** Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed that Russian operations in Ukraine are progressing slowly because Russian forces want to afford civilians the opportunity to evacuate, though Russian forces have targeted Ukrainian civilians throughout the war and repeatedly denied Ukrainian attempts to negotiate humanitarian evacuation corridors.<sup>[4]</sup> Shoigu’s statement is notably his first admission that Russian forces are behind schedule and is the first official statement on the pace of the war since Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated that the operation was “dragging” on May 4.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian milibloggers are criticizing Shoigu’s claimed consideration for civilians and claimed that Soviet troops would not have cared if “Nazi” civilians evacuated, part of the growing Russian nationalist reaction that the Kremlin is not doing enough to win the war in Ukraine.<sup>[6]</sup> Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Sergey Naryshkin stated that the ultimate goal of the Russian offensive is to ensure “Nazism” is “100% eradicated, or it will rear its head in a few years, and in an even uglier form.”<sup>[7]</sup> Naryshkin and Shoigu’s statements indicate that Russian officials are likely setting conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine in order to justify slower and more measured advances than initially anticipated.

**Forcefully mobilized servicemen from the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics continued to protest the Russian and proxy military command.** Servicemen of the 3rd Infantry Battalion of the 105th Infantry Regiment from the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) recorded a video appeal to DNR Head Denis Pushilin wherein they claimed they were mobilized on February 23 and that they have been forced to actively participate in hostilities despite their lack of military experience. The battalion stated that they served on the frontlines in Mariupol and have been redeployed to the territory of the

Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) with only 60% of their original personnel and are now dealing with severe morale issues and physical exhaustion. The battalion notably claimed that the servicemen did not go through routine medical inspection prior to service and that many are suffering from chronic illnesses that should have rendered them ineligible for service. The video appeal is consistent with numerous reports from Ukrainian and Western sources that proxy forces are largely forcibly mobilized, poorly trained, and suffering from declining morale, but is notable due to the willingness of the DNR servicemen to publicly express their discontent.[8]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces have likely abandoned efforts to encircle large Ukrainian formations in eastern Ukraine and are instead attempting to secure smaller encirclements and focus on Severodonetsk.
- This change in the Russian approach is enabling gradual advances—but at the cost of abandoning several intended lines of advance and abandoning the Kremlin's intended deep encirclement of Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces are likely conducting a controlled withdrawal southwest of Popasna near Bakhmut to protect Ukrainian supply lines against Russian offensives in the southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian occupation authorities in Mariupol announced that they will hold war crimes trials against Ukrainian soldiers in Mariupol in a likely effort to strengthen judicial control of the city and support false Kremlin narratives of Ukrainian crimes.
- Russian forces are attempting to retake Ternova in northern Kharkiv Oblast and seek to stabilize defensive positions near the Russian border against the Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Russian forces are forming reserves and deploying S-400 missile systems in northwest Crimea to reinforce the southern axis.
- Several DNR servicemen openly released a video appeal to DNR leader Denis Pushilin stating they have been forced into combat operations without proper support, indicating increasing demoralization among Russian and proxy forces.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 23

[Click here to read the latest report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

May 23, 6:00 pm ET

Russian nationalist figures are increasingly criticizing the failures of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine and are calling for further mobilization that the Kremlin likely remains unwilling and unable to pursue in the short term. The All-Russian Officers Assembly, an independent pro-Russian veterans' association that seeks to reform Russian military strategy, called for Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin to declare war on Ukraine and introduce partial mobilization in Russia on May 19.[1] The Assembly said that Russia's "special military operation" failed to achieve its goals in three months, especially after the failed Siverskyi Donets River crossings. ISW previously assessed that the destruction of nearly an entire Russian battalion tactical group (BTG) during a failed river crossing on May 11 shocked Russian military observers and prompted them to question Russian competence.[2] The Assembly's appeal called on Putin to recognize that Russian forces are no longer only "denazifying" Ukraine but are fighting a war for Russia's historic territories and existence in the world order. The officers demanded that the Kremlin mobilize all regions bordering NATO countries (including Ukraine), form territorial defense squads, extend standard military service terms from one year to two, and form new supreme wartime administrations over Russia, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR), and newly occupied Ukrainian settlements. The officers also demanded the death penalty for deserters.

The Assembly's letter may be a leading indicator of elements of the Russian government and society setting informational conditions to declare partial mobilization. However, the Kremlin has so far declined to take this step likely due to concerns over domestic backlash and flaws in Russia's mobilization systems.[3] The All-Russian Officers Assembly called on Putin to recognize the independence of the DNR and LNR three weeks prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, setting conditions for the Russian "special military operation".[4] Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced on May 20 that Russia will form 12 new Western Military District units (of unspecified echelon) before the end of the year in response to NATO expansion.[5] Russian forces may intend to

man these units with newly mobilized personnel, as it is unclear how else the Kremlin could generate the manpower for new units. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces are withdrawing old T-62 tanks from storage to form new BTGs.<sup>[6]</sup> Russia is likely continuing to exhaust its remaining combat-ready reserves to maintain the momentum of the Battle of Severodonetsk, rather than prioritizing preparations for new reinforcements. ISW previously assessed that Russian mobilization is unlikely to generate combat-ready force due to hasty training.<sup>[7]</sup>

**More Russians supportive of the Kremlin and the Russian invasion of Ukraine are beginning to criticize the Kremlin openly.** Russian milbloggers claimed that the Kremlin will not honor the Officers Assembly appeal, indicating an intensifying negative perception of the Russian leadership among Russians supportive of the war in Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> Kaliningrad Oblast Governor Anton Alikhanov publicly stated that the Russian war in Ukraine has disrupted transport routes and construction schedules in the region, a rare admission of the economic cost of the war from a Russian government official.<sup>[9]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian military personnel are increasingly complaining about the ineffectiveness of offensive operations against Ukrainian troops.<sup>[10]</sup>

**Unidentified assailants continued attacks against military recruitment offices in Russia on May 23, indicating growing discontent with conscription.**<sup>[11]</sup> A Russian Telegram channel reported that an unknown attacker threw a Molotov cocktail at the military recruitment office in the Udmurtia region, which follows a May 19 incident wherein a Russian conscript shot at a recruitment office in Zheleznogorsk-Ilimsky (Irkutsk Oblast) with a pneumatic device.<sup>[12]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff previously reported that 12 total attacks on recruitment offices have happened since the beginning of the war, with five happening in the past few weeks alone.<sup>[13]</sup> These attacks may represent growing domestic discontent with conscription and recruitment practices.

**The UK Ministry of Defense reported that Russia has suffered a similar death toll within the first three months of the invasion of Ukraine as was experienced by the Soviet Union over the course of nine years in Afghanistan.**<sup>[14]</sup> The British Ministry of Defense stated that a combination of poor low-level tactics, poor air defense, lack of operational flexibility, and poor command methods have resulted in repeated mistakes and failures, which are continuing to be evident in Donbas. The report noted that the Russian public is sensitive to high casualty numbers, and assessed that as casualties suffered in Ukraine grow and become harder to conceal, public dissatisfaction will increase.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian nationalist figures (including veterans and military commentators) are increasingly criticizing the failures of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine and are calling for further mobilization that the Kremlin likely remains unwilling and unable to pursue in the short term.
- Russian forces around Izyum increased their tempo of air and artillery strikes and likely intend to attempt to resume stalled offensive operations in the coming days.
- Russian operations to encircle Severodonetsk made minor gains in the past 24 hours, driving north through Zolote. Fighting is ongoing in Lyman (north of Severodonetsk) as Russian forces attempt to cut off Ukrainian supply lines
- Russian forces will likely make further minor gains west of Popasna in the near future but are unlikely to be able to quickly seize Bakhmut.
- The Ukrainian counteroffensive northeast of Kharkiv continues to threaten Russian positions and is forcing Russia to pull units from ongoing offensive operations in eastern Ukraine to shore up their defensive positions near Vovchansk.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Mason Clark

May 22, 4:00 pm ET

**Russian forces made only minimal gains in eastern Ukraine on May 22.** New reporting confirmed that Russian troops previously recaptured Rubizhne in northern Kharkiv Oblast, on May 19. Russian forces are likely committing additional reinforcements to hold their positions on the west bank of the Siverskyi Donets River in northern Kharkiv—rather than withdrawing across the river to use it as a defensive position—to prevent any further Ukrainian advances to the north or the east that could

threaten Russian lines of communication to the Izyum axis.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian sources additionally confirmed previous Russian-claimed advances around Popasna, and Russian forces likely seek to open a new line of advance north from Popasna to complete the encirclement of Severodonetsk while simultaneously driving west toward Bakhmut, though Russian forces are unlikely to be able to fully resource both lines of advance simultaneously.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian sources confirmed that Russian forces have secured local advances to the north and west of Popasna since at least May 20. Russian forces likely seek to push further west toward Bakhmut and north to support the encirclement of Severodonetsk but remain unlikely to achieve rapid advances.
- Russian forces will likely attempt to hold positions west of the Siverskyi Donets River against Ukrainian attacks (rather than retreating across the river) to prevent further Ukrainian advances from threatening Russian lines of communication to Izyum.
- Russian occupying forces continued filtration and deportation procedures in and around Mariupol.
- Russian forces are likely preparing to resume offensives on the southern axis.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Mason Clark

May 21, 5:30 pm ET

Russian forces intensified efforts to encircle and capture Severodonetsk on May 21 and will likely continue to do so in the coming days as efforts on other axes of advance, including Izyum, remain largely stalled. Russian troops in Luhansk Oblast will likely move to capitalize on recent gains made in the Rubizhne-Severodonetsk-Luhansk-Popasna arc to encircle and besiege Severodonetsk—the final Ukrainian strongpoint in Luhansk Oblast. Russian milbloggers are hypothesizing on the success of Russian tactics in the area and have dubbed it the Battle of Severodonetsk—emphasizing that this is the preliminary line of effort in the Donbas theatre.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are conducting operations to cut off Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) between Severodonetsk and Lysychansk across the Severskyi Donets River.
- The information space in Mariupol will likely become increasingly restricted in the coming weeks as Russian forces shift focus from completing the capture of the Azovstal Steel Plant to consolidating occupational control of the city.
- Russian troops are likely reinforcing their grouping around Kharkiv City to prevent further Ukrainian advances toward the international border.
- Russian forces may be assembling forces in certain areas of Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts to initiate further offensive operations on the southern axis.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros

May 20, 5:30 ET

Russian forces are focusing on digging in and reinforcing defensive positions in Kharkiv and along the Southern Axis in preparation for Ukrainian counteroffensives, while the majority of active offensive operations remain confined to Izyum-Donetsk City arc and especially the Popasna-Severodonetsk area. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are creating secondary defensive lines on the Southern Axis, indicating that the Russian grouping in this area may be preparing for a major Ukrainian counter-offensive and a protracted conflict.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces

reportedly are holding defensive positions north of Kharkiv City following the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive since May 5 and have conducted limited spoiling attacks either to give Russian forces time to complete their redeployment back to Russia in good order or to allow reinforcements to arrive to defend territory in Kharkiv Oblast. Significant Russian offensive operations are confined to the area of Severodonetsk. Russian troops have made marginal gains to the north, west, and south of the city, especially around Popasna, in order to attempt to take control of Severodonetsk.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces may have made marginal gains to the north, west, and south of Popasna in order to continue their offensive on Severodonetsk from the south.
- Russian sources may be overstating the number of Ukrainian defenders who have been evacuated from Azovstal to either maximize the number of Russian prisoners of war who may be exchanged for Ukrainian soldiers or to avoid the embarrassment of admitting they have been locked into a months-long siege against only “hundreds” of Ukrainian soldiers.
- Russian troops reportedly regained certain positions taken by the Ukrainian counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces are likely preparing for a major Ukrainian counteroffensive and protracted conflict on the Southern Axis.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 19, 5:30 pm ET

**Ukrainian military officials reported that some Russian troops withdrawn from the Kharkiv City axis have redeployed to western Donetsk Oblast on May 19.** The Ukrainian General Staff said that 260 servicemen withdrawn from the Kharkiv City axis arrived to replace the significant combat losses that the 107th Motorized Rifle Battalion has taken approximately 20 km southwest of Donetsk City. [1] The Ukrainian Military Directorate (GUR) intercepted a Russian serviceman’s call suggesting that some of the 400 servicemen from the Kharkiv City axis who had arrived elsewhere in Donbas were shocked by the intensity of the fighting there compared with what they had experienced in Kharkiv Oblast.[2]

**Russian forces are continuing to suffer shortages of reserve manpower, causing the Russian military command to consolidate depleted battalion tactical groups (BTGs).** An unnamed US defense official reported that Russian forces still have 106 BTGs operating in Ukraine but had to disband and combine some to compensate for losses.[3] Ukrainian General Staff Main Operations Deputy Chief Oleksiy Gromov reported that Russian forces are combining units of the Pacific and Northern Fleets at the permanent locations of the 40th Separate Marine Brigade and the 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade, respectively.[4] Gromov added that Russian forces are training servicemen in Krasnodar Krai to replenish units of the 49th Combined Arms Army and are trying to restore combat power of Russian units withdrawn from the battlefield in occupied Crimea.

**Unknown Russian perpetrators conducted a series of Molotov cocktail attacks on Russian military commissariats throughout the country in May, likely in protest of covert mobilization.** Russian media and local Telegram channels reported deliberate acts of arson against military commissariats in three Moscow Oblast settlements—Omsk, Volgograd, Ryazan Oblast, and Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District—between May 4 and May 18.[5] Ukrainian General Staff Main Operations Deputy Chief Oleksiy Gromov said that there were at least 12 cases of deliberate arson against military commissariats in total and five last week.[6] Russian officials caught two 16-year-olds in the act in one Moscow Oblast settlement, which suggests that Russian citizens are likely responsible for the attacks on military commissariats.[7]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are intensifying operations to advance north and west of Popasna in preparation for an offensive toward Severodonetsk.

- Russian and proxy authorities in Mariupol are struggling to establish coherent administrative control of the city.
- Russian forces reportedly attempted to regain control of the settlements they lost during the Ukrainian counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces are bolstering their naval presence around Snake Island to fortify their grouping on the island.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko and Karolina Hird

May 18, 6:15 pm ET

**Russian occupation authorities announced plans to destroy the Azovstal Steel Plant and turn Mariupol into a resort city, depriving Russia of some of the most important economic benefits it hoped to reap by taking the city in the first place.** Head of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Denis Pushilin stated that DNR authorities are planning to level Azovstal after completing its capture.<sup>[1]</sup> Azovstal was a major element of Mariupol's economy before the war because of its unique function as a full-cycle metallurgical complex, the 10,000 jobs associated with production at the plant, the billions of dollars of foreign exchange earnings and taxes it generated, and its production output of 7,000 tons of steel, 6 million tons of iron, and 4.5 million tons of rolled metal, according to the Mariupol City Council.<sup>[2]</sup> Pushilin stated that the DNR intends to rebuild Mariupol to be a "resort city," while admitting that 60% of the structures in Mariupol have been destroyed to the point where they cannot be rebuilt.<sup>[3]</sup> The announced plan to turn Mariupol into a center of tourism and leisure following the complete destruction of a major center of economic activity in Mariupol, is indicative of the damage that Russian troops have inflicted on themselves through the destruction of Mariupol. Russia does not need another resort town on the Black Sea. It does need the kind of hard currency that a plant like Azovstal had generated. This announcement epitomizes the kind of Pyrrhic victories Russian forces have won in Ukraine, to the extent that they have won victories at all.

**The Kremlin may hope to offset the loss of revenues from Azovstal and other destroyed infrastructure in Ukraine by profiting from the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant that is forces have seized.** Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnulin announced that he will allocate maximum integration assistance for Zaporizhia Oblast to work in a "friendly Russian family" during his visit to Melitopol on May 18.<sup>[4]</sup> Khusnulin added that the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant will exclusively work for Russia and will sell electricity to Ukraine. This statement is a clear Russian recognition that there will be an independent Ukraine at the end of this war and that Russia seeks to restore its energy leverage over Ukraine and possibly the West more broadly that has been reduced by sanctions and efforts to reduce reliance on Russian energy. It also reinforces the urgency of helping Ukraine regain control of Enerhodar City and the rest of its occupied territory to forestall this renewed economic thrall dom. ISW previously reported that Russian forces started digging trenches and blocking highways to Enerhodar City.<sup>[5]</sup> The Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration reported that Russian occupation authorities continued to prepare for a referendum in Enerhodar City on May 18.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Ukrainian officials reported protests in Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) over forced mobilizations on May 16-17.** The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that relatives of the forcefully mobilized LNR servicemen demanded an immediate return of their family members from combat in Luhansk City and Rovenky approximately 50 kilometers west of Russian border.<sup>[7]</sup> The GUR noted that perceptions of war and resentment of mobilization in LNR worsened because of the high casualties Russian forces have suffered and the fact that Russian authorities are reportedly evading payments to the families of wounded and killed servicemen. Mariupol Mayor's Advisor Petro Andryushenko had previously reported that a protest against mobilization had occurred in Donetsk City on May 16.<sup>[8]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are continuing to inflict air and artillery strikes on the Azovstal Steel Plant, indicating that a remnant of Ukrainian defense is still in the plant despite evacuations over the last few days.
- Russian occupying authorities are reportedly planning to level the Azovstal Steel Plant after completing its capture, which directly undermines the large strategic economic importance of capturing the plant.
- Russian forces continued to prepare for an assault on Severodonetsk and intensified operations around Lyman.
- Russian forces continued to prioritize holding positions around the Russian border to prevent further Ukrainian advances north of Kharkiv City and will likely continue to do so at the expense of deploying additional reinforcements to other axes of advance.
- Russian troops focused on maintaining their positions on the Southern Axis and on conducting rocket, missile, and artillery strikes along the frontline.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros

May 17, 7:00 pm ET

**Mariupol defenders trapped in the Azovstal Steel Plant likely surrendered after Ukrainian officials negotiated evacuation measures with the Kremlin.** Russian forces began evacuating wounded Ukrainian forces to Russian-occupied settlements in Donetsk Oblast on May 16 after the Russian Defense Ministry proposed the agreement earlier in the day. Ukrainian officials said that they will seek to return the Mariupol defenders to Ukraine in a prisoner exchange and continue to undertake appropriate measures to rescue all Ukrainian servicemen from Azovstal.

**The Kremlin might have agreed to the conditional surrender of the Azovstal defenders to accelerate Russia's ability to declare Mariupol fully under its control.** The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Russian Defense Ministry's Department of Information and Mass Communications is hastily preparing a press tour of foreign journalists through occupied territories of Ukraine between May 18 and May 21.<sup>[1]</sup> The Kremlin also could have agreed to such a deal to secure a victory in order to deflect criticism on social media of the failed Russian Siverskyi Donets River crossings and the overall slow pace of the invasion.

**The Kremlin might refuse to exchange the Mariupol defenders.** Some Russian State Duma members are petitioning to pass laws that would prohibit prisoner exchanges for individuals accused of "Nazism."<sup>[2]</sup> Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin claimed that the Mariupol defenders must be charged with war crimes and cannot be exchanged for Russian prisoners of war.<sup>[3]</sup> The Kremlin may ignore the Russian State Duma's concerns or use them to sabotage negotiations with Ukraine.

**The surrender agreement generated some outrage and confusion on pro-Russian social media, rather than the celebration of the full capitulation of Mariupol that the Kremlin likely expected—possibly undermining Russian information operations.** Some Russian Telegram channels ridiculed the Russian Defense Ministry for negotiating with Ukrainian "terrorists" and "Nazis."<sup>[4]</sup> Some bloggers criticized the Donetsk People's Republic for organizing the evacuation proceedings and blamed negotiating authorities for creating conditions for Ukrainian martyrdom.<sup>[5]</sup> Several Russian bloggers also called for the imprisonment or murder of surrendered Ukrainian servicemen.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian audiences are likely dissatisfied with the surrender agreement because they expected Russian forces to destroy Ukrainian defenders at Azovstal. The Kremlin has created large amounts of propaganda that portrayed successful Russian assaults on Azovstal without clearly setting conditions for surrender negotiations. Some Russians may find it difficult to reconcile the triumphant messaging with the abrupt negotiations leading to a negotiated surrender.

**Russian forces have intensified artillery fire on Ukrainian border settlements in Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts over the past few weeks.** The Ukrainian Northern Operational Command reported that Russian forces shelled the border between Sumy Oblast and Russia over 70 times on May 17.<sup>[7]</sup> Sumy Oblast Administration Head Dmytro Zhyvytskyi said that Russian saboteurs unsuccessfully attempted to break through the Ukrainian border on May 17.<sup>[8]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian military command ordered the remaining defenders of Azovstal to surrender, likely conditionally, in hopes of returning them to Ukraine as part of yet-to-be-negotiated prisoner exchanges.
- The announcement of the likely conditional surrender generated outrage in the Russian information space and demands in the Russian Duma for laws prohibiting exchanging the surrendered defenders of Azovstal.
- Russian forces continued to make limited advances in Donbas, primarily focused on setting conditions for the Battle of Severodonetsk.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 16

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 16, 6:00 pm ET

**Russian forces conducted limited and largely unsuccessful ground offensives along the front line in Ukraine on May 16.** The Russian grouping around Kharkiv City is notably trying to hold the border and prevent Ukrainian troops from advancing further north. This activity is different from previous Russian withdrawals from around Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy earlier in the war when the Russians pulled completely back to Russian territory. Russian troops may seek to retain positions in Ukraine and continue artillery strikes on Ukrainian positions in order to prevent Ukrainian forces from getting into tube or rocket-artillery range of the outskirts of Belgorod, a major city in Russia and a key hub of the Russian military effort. The Russians might alternatively hope to conduct a counter-counter-offensive to push back south toward Kharkiv, although such an effort is highly unlikely to succeed.

**Russian military bloggers continued to post analysis that is skeptical of Russian efforts and increasingly in-line with Western assessments of Russian military failures in Ukraine.** One such blogger, Igor Strelkov, claimed that the Russian offensive to take Donbas has ultimately failed and that "not a single large settlement "has been liberated.<sup>[1]</sup> Strelkov even noted that the capture of Rubizhne is relatively insignificant because it happened before the new offensive in Donbas had begun. Strelkov stated that Russian forces are unlikely to liberate Donbas by the summer and that Ukrainian troops will hold their positions around Donetsk City. Strelkov notably claimed that Russian failures thus far have not surprised him because the intent of Russian command has been so evident throughout the operation that Ukrainian troops are aware of exactly how to best respond and warns that Russian troops are fighting to the point of exhaustion under "rules proposed by the enemy." The continued disenchantment of pro-Russian milbloggers with the Russian war effort may fuel dissatisfaction in Russia itself, especially if Moscow continues to press recruitment and conscription efforts that send poorly-trained cannon-fodder to the front lines.

**Over 260 Mariupol defenders evacuated from the Azovstal Steel Plant to Russian occupied settlements in Donetsk Oblast on May 16.**<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian and Russian authorities negotiated evacuation for wounded Ukrainian servicemen via humanitarian corridors. Ukrainian officials previously called for the evacuation of 60 medics and critically wounded servicemen on May 13. <sup>[3]</sup> The Kremlin may extend humanitarian corridors for remaining Ukrainian defenders in an effort to fully control Mariupol.

**Frictions between Russian occupation administrations and pro-Russian collaborators is growing in occupied areas of Ukraine.** The Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration reported that Russian forces are having serious conflicts with collaborators due to interpersonal power conflicts.<sup>[4]</sup> A well-known collaborator in Zaporizhia accused the Russian-installed governor of the area of stealing his 10,000 ruble compensation. Advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol Petro Andryshchenko additionally claimed that relatives of those mobilized into the forces of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) are holding a mass protest against mobilization in Donetsk City. While ISW cannot independently verify these claims, such discontent amongst occupation elements suggests a general lack of planning by Russian authorities in occupied areas, now compounded by increasingly evident Russian losses.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian and Ukrainian authorities negotiated the evacuation of 264 wounded Ukrainian servicemen from the Azovstal Steel Plant on May 16.
- Ukrainian forces reached the Russian border north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful ground operations in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and did not make any confirmed advances on May 16.
- Russian forces continued to fortify their positions in Zaporizhia Oblast.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros

May 15, 6:30 pm ET

**Russian forces have likely abandoned the objective of completing a large-scale encirclement of Ukrainian units from Donetsk City to Izyum in favor of completing the seizure of Luhansk Oblast.** Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai said that the Russian military command likely understands that it will not be able to seize Donetsk Oblast but believes that it has the capacity

to reach the administrative borders of Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> His observations are generally consistent with our analysis. The Russian military command will likely prioritize the Battle of Severodonetsk going forward, with some efforts dedicated to disrupting Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in eastern Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces are continuing a coordinated effort to seize Severodonetsk from the north and the south, which would result in a shallower encirclement of Ukrainian troops than originally expected. The failed Russian attempts to cross the Siverskyi Donets River near Kremenna may shift Russian encirclement operations further east, closer to Severodonetsk via Rubizhne, rather than conducting a wider encirclement along multiple axes. Russian forces have also likely been scaling down advances to Slovyansk from Izyum, possibly due to the slow pace of the offensive operation there.

**Russian forces have likely run out of combat-ready reservists, forcing the Russian military command to amalgamate soldiers from many different elements, including private military companies and proxy militias, into ostensibly regular army units and naval infantry.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that approximately 2,500 Russian reservists are training in Belgorod, Voronezh, and Rostov oblasts to reinforce Russian offensive operations in Ukraine. That number of reservists is unlikely to generate enough force to replenish Russian units that have reportedly lost up to 20 percent of staffing in some areas—to say nothing of the battalion tactical group that was largely destroyed recently while attempting to cross the Siverskyi Donets River.<sup>[2]</sup> The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate stated that Russian forces are conducting covert mobilization and creating new units with newly mobilized personnel who likely have insufficient training to be effective and little motivation to fight.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces also deployed new conscripts from occupied settlements in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts to maintain an offensive around Kharkiv City, likely due to the lack of Russian reserves.<sup>[4]</sup>

Russian private military companies are reportedly forming combined units with airborne elements due to significant losses in manpower.<sup>[5]</sup> Denaturing elite airborne units with mercenaries is shocking, and would be the clearest indication yet that Russia has exhausted its available combat-ready manpower reserves. The Russian 810th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade is reportedly receiving personnel from other Black Sea Fleet units, including navy ship crewmembers.<sup>[6]</sup> Newly formed or regrouped units are unlikely to be effective in combat.

**Russian forces are likely fortifying occupied settlements in southern Ukraine, indicating that the Russians are seeking to establish permanent control in the region.** Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces began digging trenches and building concrete revetments in unspecified areas of Mykolaiv and Kherson Oblast, near Melitopol, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces will likely prioritize winning the Battle of Severodonetsk over reaching the administrative borders of Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces did not advance in the Slovyansk direction due to unsuccessful offensive operations in the Izyum area. Ukrainian aviation continues to operate north and east of Izyum.
- Russian forces continued to launch artillery, air, and naval assaults on the Azovstal Steel Plant, but Mariupol defenders maintained their positions.
- Russian forces are fortifying occupied settlements along the southern axis, indicative of Russian objectives for permanent control of the area.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 14

##### Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

May 14, 7:00 pm ET

The Ukrainian destruction of significant elements of a Russian motorized rifle brigade that tried to cross a pontoon bridge over the Siverskyi Donets River on May 11 has shocked prominent Russian milbloggers. Those bloggers have begun commenting on the incompetence of the Russian military to their hundreds of thousands of followers. The attempted river crossing showed a stunning lack of tactical sense as satellite images show (destroyed) Russian vehicles tightly bunched up at both ends of the (destroyed) bridge, clearly allowing Ukrainian artillerymen to kill hundreds and destroy scores of vehicles with concentrated strikes. The milbloggers who have hitherto been cheering on the Russian military criticized Russian armed forces leadership for failing to learn

from experience in the war. They also expressed the concern that the constant pushing of Russia's propaganda lines was making it hard for them to understand what was actually going on.

The effects of this change in tone and discourse by these milbloggers are uncertain but could be potent. People living under tightly censored regimes often trust individuals who seem to be independent of but generally aligned with the government more than the government line (even more than do citizens of democratic societies). The commentary by these widely read milbloggers may fuel burgeoning doubts in Russia about Russia's prospects in this war and the competence of Russia's military leaders (at least).

The destruction of the motorized rifle elements may also severely disrupt Russian efforts to isolate Severodonetsk and Lysychansk from the north. Russian troops made no attempts to advance in that area in the last 24 hours.

**Russian forces continued operations to set conditions for the Battle of Severodonetsk from the south, however, advancing on the town of Zolote, roughly 30 km south of**

**Severodonetsk.** Russian troops likely seek to secure the highway north from Zolote to Severodonetsk for their advance, but they may also seek to cut the last highway linking Severodonetsk with the rest of Ukraine via Bakhmut. They could try to strike northwest across the country from their current positions to cut that highway closer to Lysychansk and Severodonetsk. The Russians are extremely unlikely to be able to take Bakhmut but they may be able to cut or render unusable the highway from Bakhmut to Severodonetsk if they can advance far enough along either of these possible routes.

**Ukrainian forces will likely conduct counteroffensive operations to dislodge the Russians from around Izyum, according to Ukrainian officials.** We have previously noted that Russian artillery fire directed to the west from around Izyum was more likely intended to disrupt such a counter-offensive than to set conditions for a Russian attack.

**Russian forces continued their withdrawal from Kharkiv Oblast but will likely seek to hold a line east of Vovchansk to secure the ground line of communication (GLOC) running from Belgorod through Vovchansk to Izyum.** The terrain in this area generally favors the defender, and the Russians have other GLOCs with which to supply Izyum, so the Ukrainians may not try to advance much farther to the east at this time.

**Ukrainian defenders continued to fight in the Azovstal Plant in Mariupol despite horrific conditions and continued Russian attacks.** The Ukrainian defense of Azovstal is still tying down Russian combat forces and inflicting casualties.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Catastrophic Russian losses in a failed river crossing and the military incompetence displayed in that crossing have shaken the confidence of some prominent Russian milbloggers.
- Russian forces continue shaping operations for the Battle of Severodonetsk from the south even though those losses have at least temporarily disrupted their efforts from the north.
- Ukrainian forces announced that they will conduct a counteroffensive around Izyum.
- Russian forces continued to withdraw from northern Kharkiv Oblast, but will likely seek to hold a line defending their ground lines of communication from Belgorod via Vovchansk to Izyum.

## **Russian Annexation of Occupied Ukraine Is Putin's Unacceptable “Off-Ramp”**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

By Katherine Lawlor and Mason Clark

**May 13, 2022**

**Key Takeaway:** Russian President Vladimir Putin likely intends to annex occupied southern and eastern Ukraine directly into the Russian Federation in the coming months. He will likely then state, directly or obliquely, that Russian doctrine permitting the use of nuclear weapons to defend Russian

territory applies to those newly annexed territories. Such actions would threaten Ukraine and its partners with nuclear attack if Ukrainian counteroffensives to liberate Russian-occupied territory continue. Putin may believe that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would restore Russian deterrence after his disastrous invasion shattered Russia's conventional deterrent capabilities.

Putin's timeline for annexation is likely contingent on the extent to which he understands the degraded state of the Russian military in Ukraine. The Russian military has not yet achieved Putin's stated territorial objectives of securing all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and is unlikely to do so. If Putin understands his military weakness, he will likely rush annexation and introduce the nuclear deterrent quickly in an attempt to retain control of the Ukrainian territory that Russia currently occupies. If Putin believes that Russian forces are capable of additional advances, he will likely delay the annexation in hopes of covering more territory with it. In that case, his poor leadership and Ukrainian counteroffensives could drive the Russian military toward a state of collapse. Putin could also attempt to maintain Russian attacks while mobilizing additional forces. He might delay announcing annexation for far longer in this case, waiting until reinforcements could arrive to gain more territory to annex.

Ukraine and its Western partners likely have a narrow window of opportunity to support a Ukrainian counteroffensive into occupied Ukrainian territory before the Kremlin annexes that territory. Ukraine and the West must also develop a coherent plan for responding to any annexation and to the threat of nuclear attack that might follow it. The political and ethical consequences of a longstanding Russian occupation of southeastern Ukraine would be devastating to the long-term viability of the Ukrainian state. Vital Ukrainian and Western national interests require urgent Western support for an immediate Ukrainian counteroffensive.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

May 13, 7:00 pm ET

**The Russian military has likely decided to withdraw fully from its positions around Kharkiv City in the face of Ukrainian counteroffensives and the limited availability of reinforcements.** Russian units have generally not attempted to hold ground against counterattacking Ukrainian forces over the past several days, with a few exceptions. Reports from Western officials and a video from an officer of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) indicate that Moscow is focused on conducting an orderly withdrawal and prioritizing getting Russians back home before allowing proxy forces to enter Russia rather than trying to hold its positions near the city.

**Ukraine thus appears to have won the Battle of Kharkiv. Ukrainian forces prevented Russian troops from encircling, let alone seizing Kharkiv, and then expelled them from around the city, as they did to Russian forces attempting to seize Kyiv.** Ukrainian forces will likely attempt to disrupt at least the westernmost of the ground lines of communication (GLOCs) between Belgorod and Russian forces concentrated around Izyum, although Russia is using several GLOCs, including some further away from current Ukrainian positions than any Ukrainian counteroffensive is likely to reach soon. The terrain east of current Ukrainian positions may also favor the Russians attempting to defend their GLOCs, as large water features canalize movement and create chokepoints that the Ukrainians would have to breakthrough.

**Russian troops continued efforts to advance all along the periphery of the Izyum-Donetsk city salient but made little progress.** Russian forces attempted a ground offensive from Izyum that made no progress. We had previously hypothesized that Russia might give up on attempts to advance from Izyum, but the Russians have either not made such a decision or have not fully committed to it yet.  
[1] Small-scale and unsuccessful attacks on the southern end of the salient near Donetsk City continued but made no real progress.

**The main Russian effort continues to be the attempt to encircle Severodonetsk and Lysychansk from the north and from the south.** Russian troops attacking from Popasna to the north made no significant progress in the last 24 hours. Russian forces coming north-to-south have failed to cross the Siverskyi Donets River and taken devastating losses in their attempts. The Russians may not have enough additional fresh combat power to offset those losses and continue the offensive on a large enough scale to complete the encirclement, although they will likely continue to try to do so.

The Ukrainian defenders of Mariupol continue to fight despite the odds, although Russian attackers appear to have penetrated into the Azovstal facility.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukraine has likely won the Battle of Kharkiv. Russian forces continued to withdraw from the northern settlements around Kharkiv City. Ukrainian forces will likely attempt to disrupt Russian ground lines of communication to Izyum.
- Ukrainian forces have likely disrupted the Russian attempt to cross the Siverskyi Donets River in force, undermining Russian efforts to mass troops in northern Donbas and complete the encirclement of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk.
- Russian forces have likely secured the highway near the western entrance to the Azovstal Steel Plant but fighting for the facility continues.
- Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast are likely attempting to reach artillery range outside Zaporizhia City.
- Ukrainian forces are reportedly attempting to regain control of Snake Island off the Romanian coast or at least disrupt Russia's ability to use it.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 12, 6:45 ET

Russian forces may be abandoning efforts at a wide encirclement of Ukrainian troops along the Izyum-Sloviansk-Debaltseve line in favor of shallower encirclements of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Russian forces likely control almost all of Rubizhne as of May 12 and have likely seized the town of Voevodivka, north of Severodonetsk.<sup>[1]</sup> They will likely launch a ground offensive on or around Severodonetsk in the coming days. The relative success of Russian operations in this area combined with their failure to advance from Izyum and the notable decline in the energy of that attempted advance suggest that they may be giving up on the Izyum axis. Reports that Russian forces in Popasna are advancing north, toward Severodonetsk-Lysychansk, rather than east toward the Sloviansk-Debaltseve highway, support this hypothesis.

It is unclear if Russian forces can encircle, let alone capture, Severodonetsk and Lysychansk even if they focus their efforts on that much-reduced objective. Russian offensives have bogged down every time they hit a built-up area throughout this war, and these areas are unlikely to be different. Continued and expanding reports of demoralization and refusals to fight among Russian units suggest that the effective combat power of Russian troops in the east continues to be low and may drop further. If the Russians abandon efforts to advance from Izyum, moreover, Ukrainian forces would be able to concentrate their efforts on defending Severodonetsk-Lysychansk or, in the worst case, breaking a Russian encirclement before those settlements fall.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive around Kharkiv is also forcing the Russian command to make hard choices, as it was likely intended to do. The UK Ministry of Defense reports that Russian forces pulled back from Kharkiv have been sent toward Rubizhne and Severodonetsk but at the cost of ceding ground in Kharkiv from which the Russians had been shelling the city.<sup>[2]</sup> The counteroffensive is also forcing Russian units still near the city to focus their bombardment on the attacking Ukrainian troops rather than continuing their attacks on the city itself. The Ukrainian counteroffensive near Kharkiv is starting to look very similar to the counteroffensive that ultimately drove Russian troops away from Kyiv and out of western Ukraine entirely, although it is too soon to tell if the Russians will make a similar decision here.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces made marginal gains to the north of Severodonetsk and have likely captured Rubizhne and Voevodivka.
- Russian forces fired intensively on Ukrainian positions in northern Kharkiv to stop the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive around Kharkiv City. The artillery focus on Ukrainian positions has likely diverted the Russian artillery that remains in range of Kharkiv to the more urgent task of stopping the Ukrainian advance.

- Russian forces are strengthening their position on Snake Island in an effort to block Ukrainian maritime communications and capabilities in the northwestern Black Sea on the approaches to Odesa.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 11

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

May 11, 5:30pm ET

**Russian forces did not make any significant advances anywhere in Ukraine on May 11, and Ukrainian forces took further ground northeast of Kharkiv.** The Ukrainian counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City has forced Russian troops onto the defensive and necessitated reinforcement and replenishment efforts intended to prevent further Ukrainian advances towards the Russian border. Russian efforts along the Southern Axis and in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts remain similarly stalled, and Russian forces have not made any significant gains in the face of continued successful Ukrainian defenses.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City has forced Russian troops onto the defensive and has successfully alleviated artillery pressure on Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces continued efforts to encircle Ukrainian positions in the Severodonetsk-Rubizhne-Lysychansk area but did not make any confirmed advances.
- Russian forces may be initiating a new advance towards Bakhmut after capturing Popasna in order to secure highway access north to Slovyansk.
- Russian forces are attempting to consolidate their positions in western Kherson Oblast to push into Mykolaiv Oblast.
- Pro-Russian Telegram sources reported Ukrainian forces may be conducting a counterattack 40km north of Izyum to cut off Russian units in this key town, though ISW cannot confirm these reports at this time.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 10

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

May 10, 7:15pm ET

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City continued to successfully push Russian forces toward the Russia-Ukraine border on May 10.** Ukrainian forces liberated several towns north of Kharkiv City and continued pushing north of the recently liberated Staryi Saltiv to capture several towns northeast of Kharkiv: a Russian source claimed that Ukrainian troops advanced to within 10km of the Russian border, though ISW cannot independently confirm these specific claims.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces from the Izyum area are reportedly redeploying northwards to attempt to alleviate the pressure of this counteroffensive and stymie further northward advances toward the Russian border.<sup>[2]</sup> The Ukrainian counteroffensive will likely continue to divert Russian troops and resources from deployment to other axes of advance where fighting has been similarly stalled out by the successful Ukrainian defense. The counteroffensive will impede the ability of Russian artillery to target the northeastern suburbs of Kharkiv City, will potentially enable Ukrainian forces to threaten Russian rear areas with their own shelling and further attacks, and—if Ukrainian forces are able to further advance the counteroffensive or Russian forces collapse along the Kharkiv axis and withdraw further—unhinge Russian offensive operations around Izyum.

**The Belarusian Ministry of Defense escalated its false claims of US and NATO preparations to attack Belarus while announcing the start of a second stage of ongoing military exercises on May 10. However, Belarus remains unlikely to join the war in Ukraine.** Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced the second stage of ongoing rapid response forces exercises on May 10 in response to what he falsely claimed were NATO escalations.<sup>[3]</sup> Belarusian First Deputy Minister of Defense Victor Gulevich accused the US and its allies of building up a military presence around Belarusian borders and claimed that Poland and the Baltic states are threatening Belarusian

territory through reconnaissance, sabotage, and special operations.<sup>[4]</sup> Gulevich announced that Belarusian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) will subsequently advance to the Western and Northwestern operational zones as part of a "whole range of measures aimed at countering possible threats" in these areas.<sup>[5]</sup> Gulevich additionally stated that the presence of 20,000 Ukrainian troops in Belarus' Southern Operational District have necessitated a deployment of unspecified Belarusian troops to three tactical directions near the Ukrainian border, which is consistent with Ukrainian General Staff reporting that certain Belarusian units have deployed to the Ukraine-Belarus border area for a combat readiness check.<sup>[6]</sup>

The rhetoric of threats to Belarus' borders is not new and was frequently employed by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in the early stages of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>[7]</sup> The Belarusian exercises, which are concentrated on Belarus' borders with Poland and the Baltic States rather than Ukraine, are likely primarily demonstrative and signal Belarus' continued political support for Russia's war in Ukraine. The exercises are likely additionally intended to draw NATO attention and possibly disrupt NATO aid to Ukraine, rather than threatening an actual military operation—similar to Russian efforts to destabilize Moldova that are likely intended to distract Romania and NATO rather than directly threaten Odesa. Belarus remains unlikely to join the war in Ukraine. Lukashenko successfully repressed domestic opposition in 2020 and 2021 but remains vulnerable to further domestic unrest if his security apparatus weakens; he is likely unwilling to risk losing his military in a stalled and deteriorating Russian war in Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian counteroffensive in northern Kharkiv took further ground and have possibly closed to within 10km of the Russian border.
- Belarusian authorities are escalating rhetoric accusing NATO and the US of threatening Belarusian borders, but Belarus remains unlikely to join the war.
- Russian operations around Izyum remain stalled.
- DNR and Russian forces are advancing efforts to consolidate their control of the ruins of Mariupol, including reportedly attempting to reopen steel plants to produce military equipment.
- Russian forces in eastern Ukraine continued attempts to encircle the Severodonetsk area and reportedly reached the Donetsk-Luhansk administrative border from Popasna.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces did not conduct any significant attacks on the southern axis.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 9

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

May 9, 7:15pm ET

**Russian forces continue to face widespread force generation challenges.** A senior US defense official stated on May 9 that the US has not observed any indicators of a "new major Russian mobilization" and that members of the private military company Wagner Group "urgently" requested hundreds of thousands of additional troops to reinforce Russian efforts in Donbas. The official noted that Russia currently has 97 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in Ukraine, but that BTGs have been moving in and out of Ukraine to refit and resupply, suggesting that Russian troops continue to sustain substantial damage in combat. ISW has previously assessed that most Russian BTGs are heavily degraded and counting BTGs is not a useful metric of Russian combat power. The Main Ukrainian Intelligence Directorate (GUR) claimed that under-trained, ill-equipped Russian conscripts are still being sent into active combat despite the Kremlin denying this practice. A prisoner of war from the BARS-7 detachment of the Wagner Group claimed that a "covert mobilization" is underway in Russia to send conscripts to clean damage caused by combat in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.

**Russian troops in Ukraine continue to display low morale and poor discipline as fighting in many areas has stalled out against Ukrainian resistance.** A senior US defense official claimed that Russian troops in Donbas are failing to obey orders from top generals. Russian forces deployed to the Zaporizhzhia area reportedly are experiencing very low morale and psychological conditions, complain about the ineffectiveness of operations in the area, frequently abuse alcohol, and shoot at their own vehicles in order to avoid going to the frontline. This is consistent with reports made by the Ukrainian General Staff that the extent of Russian losses is having widespread impacts on the willingness of Russian troops to engage in offensive operations.

**Russian authorities are likely setting conditions to integrate occupied Ukrainian territories directly into Russia, as opposed to creating proxy “People’s Republics.”** The Kherson occupation Deputy Chairman of Military Civil Administration Kirill Stremousov stated on May 9 that the Kherson region intends to become part of Russia and that Kherson authorities do not intend to hold a referendum to create an independent republic. Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Defense Ministry Oleksandr Motuzyanyk reported that Russian occupation authorities are intensifying reconnaissance measures and increasing checkpoints and patrols in occupied areas in order to prepare to integrate these regions directly into Russia. Motuzyanyk noted that Russian and Crimean groups have been arriving to occupied regions to intensify propaganda measures to prepare for integration. ISW will publish our assessment of the Kremlin’s most likely course of actions towards their occupied territories in Ukraine in the coming days.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces did not make any confirmed advances to the southeast or southwest of Izyum on May 9 but are likely attempting to concentrate the forces necessary to resume offensive operations in the coming days.
- Russian forces made marginal gains around Severodonetsk in the past 24 hours.
- Russian forces are likely continuing to amass troops in Belgorod Oblast to stop Ukrainian counterattacks around Kharkiv City from reaching the Ukrainian-Russian border.
- Russian units in Zaporizhia Oblast are regrouping and will likely receive reinforcements from forces previously deployed in Mariupol.
- The Kremlin continues to face severe force mobilization challenges, and ongoing “covert mobilization” efforts are unlikely to generate substantial combat power.
- Russian authorities are likely setting conditions to integrate occupied Ukrainian territories directly into Russia, as opposed to creating proxy “People’s Republics.”

## **Putin’s Victory Day Speech Forgoes an Opportunity to Escalate Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine**

### **Click here to read the full report.**

Katherine Lawlor and Mason Clark

May 9, 2022

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his May 9 speech to praise ongoing Russian efforts in Ukraine and reinforce existing Kremlin framing rather than announce a change. He did not announce an escalation or declare victory in the Russian war in Ukraine.<sup>[1]</sup> May 9, Victory Day, is Russia’s most important patriotic holiday and commemorates the Soviet victory in the Second World War, known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. Putin’s much-anticipated speech was a ready-made opportunity for him to alter the Kremlin’s current framing of the war in Ukraine or announce a policy change. Putin had three general options for his Victory Day address: declare some sort of Russian victory, make a policy change to ramp up the war effort in some way (such as by calling for a larger-scale mobilization or formally declaring war on Ukraine), or what he chose—to pursue a steady state narrative and reinforce the Kremlin’s existing framing (and resourcing) of the war.

#### **Key Takeaways:**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin used his May 9 speech to praise ongoing Russian efforts in Ukraine and reinforce existing Kremlin framing rather than announcing a change. He did not announce an escalation or declare victory in the Russian war in Ukraine.
- Putin likely calculated that he could not ask the Russian population for a greater commitment to the war effort and implicitly reassured the Russian people that he would not ask for a greater societal commitment in his speech.
- Putin may be recognizing the growing risks he faces at home and in Ukraine and may be adjusting his objectives, and his desired end state in Ukraine, accordingly.
- The Kremlin has already scaled down its objectives in Ukraine (from its initial objective of capturing Kyiv and full regime change) and will likely do so again—or be forced to do so by Ukrainian battlefield successes.

- Regardless of any change—or lack thereof—in the Kremlin's objectives, Putin's speech indicates that the Kremlin has likely decided to maintain its current level of resourcing in the war.
- The Kremlin attempted to demonstrate the alleged popularity of its occupation of eastern Ukraine through forced Victory Day celebrations in occupied Ukrainian territories.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

May 8, 4:00 pm ET

**Russian forces did not make any significant advances on any axis of advance on May 8.** The Ukrainian counteroffensive northeast of Kharkiv City has likely forced Russian troops to redeploy to Kharkiv instead of reinforcing stalled Russian offensive operations elsewhere in eastern Ukraine. Russian forces are continuing their attempt to reach the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts but have not made substantial territorial gains since securing Popasna on May 7.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are likely amassing in Belgorod to reinforce Russian efforts in northern Kharkiv to prevent the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive from pushing closer to the Ukraine-Russia border.
- Russian forces near Izyum focused on regrouping, replenishing, and reconnoitering Ukrainian positions in order to continue advances to the southwest and southeast of Izyum.
- Russian forces continued their ground attacks to drive to the borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts but did not make any territorial gains
- Russian troops continued to assault the Azovstal Steel Plant and advanced efforts to economically integrate occupied Mariupol into the wider Russian economy.
- Russian troops may be preparing for a renewed offensive on the Southern Axis but are unlikely to be successful in this endeavor.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Karolina Hird, and Kateryna Stepanenko

May 7, 6:45 pm ET

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive northeast of Kharkiv is making significant progress and will likely advance to the Russian border in the coming days or weeks.** Russian forces may be conducting a limited withdrawal in the face of successful Ukrainian attacks and reportedly destroyed three bridges to slow the Ukrainian advance. Armies generally only destroy bridges if they have largely decided they will not attempt to cross the river in the other direction anytime soon; Russian forces are therefore unlikely to launch operations to retake the northeast outskirts of Kharkiv liberated by Ukrainian forces in the near future. Russian forces previously destroyed several bridges during their retreat from Chernihiv Oblast—as did Ukrainian forces withdrawing in the face of the Russian offensive in the initial days of the war.

This Ukrainian offensive is likely intended to push Russian forces out of artillery range of Kharkiv city and drive to the border of Russia's Belgorod Oblast. As ISW previously forecasted, the Ukrainian counteroffensive is forcing Russian units intended for deployment elsewhere to redeploy to the Kharkiv front to halt Ukrainian attacks. Given the current rate of Ukrainian advances, Russian forces may be unable to prevent Ukrainian forces from reaching the Russian border, even with additional reinforcements. Ukrainian forces are not directly threatening Russian lines of communication to Izyum (and ISW cannot verify claims of a separate Ukrainian counteroffensive toward Izyum at this time), but

the Ukrainian counteroffensive demonstrates promising Ukrainian capabilities and may set conditions for further offensive operations into northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.

**By all indications, Russian forces will announce the creation of a Kherson People's Republic or possibly forcibly annex Kherson Oblast in the near future and are intensifying occupation measures in Mariupol.** Russian forces are reportedly increasing their security presence in both Kherson and Mariupol, including withdrawing personnel from frontline combat units to protect Russian dignitaries in Mariupol. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Leader Denis Pushilin arrived in Kherson on May 6, and local occupation officials stated the region will "strive to become a subject of Russia" and "will resemble something close to Crimea in terms of the pace of development," echoing longstanding rhetoric used by Russia's existing proxies in eastern Ukraine. As ISW has previously assessed, the Kremlin will likely form illegal proxy republics or directly annex occupied areas of southern and eastern Ukraine to cement its occupation administration and attempt to permanently strip these territories from Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces destroyed several bridges to slow Ukrainian forces and may be conducting a limited withdrawal northeast of Kharkiv city in the face of the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Ukrainian forces are making significant progress around Kharkiv and will likely advance to the Russian border in the coming days.
- Ukrainian forces continued to repel Russian advances toward Barvivko and Russian forces have likely abandoned efforts to drive directly southeast toward Slovyansk. ISW cannot confirm claims of a Ukrainian counteroffensive toward Izyum at this time.
- Russian forces claimed to capture Popasna on May 7 but remain largely stalled in eastern Ukraine.
- The Ukrainian government confirmed the last remaining civilians trapped in the Azovstal plant evacuated on May 7, though the remaining Ukrainian defenders appear unlikely to surrender. ISW will likely be unable to report any discrete changes in control of terrain until Russian forces capture the plant as a whole due to the poor information environment in Mariupol.
- By all indications, Russian forces will announce the creation of a Kherson People's Republic or possibly forcibly annex Kherson Oblast in the coming weeks to cement its occupation administration and attempt to permanently strip these territories from Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued to target Odesa with cruise missile strikes and conduct false-flag attacks in Transnistria over the past several days.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark and George Barros

May 6, 5:00 pm ET

The Ukrainian counteroffensive north and east of Kharkiv city secured further gains in the last 24 hours and may successfully push Russian forces out of artillery range of Kharkiv in the coming days. Ukrainian forces captured several settlements north and east of Kharkiv in the last 24 hours, reducing the ability of Russian forces to threaten Ukraine's second-largest city. This Ukrainian operation is developing into a successful, broader counteroffensive—as opposed to the more localized *counterattacks* that Ukrainian forces have conducted throughout the war to secure key terrain and disrupt Russian offensive operations. Ukrainian forces are notably retaking territory along a broad arc around Kharkiv rather than focusing on a narrow thrust, indicating an ability to launch larger-scale offensive operations than we have observed so far in the war (as Ukrainian forces predominantly retook the outskirts of Kyiv following Russian withdrawals rather than in a major counteroffensive). The willingness of Ukrainian forces to concentrate the forces necessary for this scale of offensive operations, rather than deploying these available forces to defenses in eastern Ukraine, additionally indicates the Ukrainian military's confidence in repelling ongoing Russian operations to encircle Ukrainian forces in the Severodonetsk area. While Ukrainian forces are unlikely to directly threaten Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum (as they run further to the east of recent

Ukrainian advances), Ukrainian forces may be able to relieve Russian pressure on Kharkiv and possibly threaten to make further advances to the Russian border.

**ISW cannot confirm initial reports of a Ukrainian Neptune anti-ship missile strike on the Russian frigate *Admiral Makarov* on May 6.[1]** Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said the United States cannot confirm the reported strike and added “we’ve been looking at this all day.”[2] ISW will update this assessment with further information as it becomes available.

#### Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian counteroffensive along a broad arc north and east of Kharkiv city took further terrain and will likely push Russian forces out of tube artillery range of the city in the coming days. The ability—and willingness—of the Ukrainian military to concentrate the forces in Kharkiv necessary to conduct this operation indicates Ukrainian confidence in repelling ongoing Russian attacks with their existing forces in the region.
- Russian forces did not make any progress on the Izyum axis.
- Russian forces likely secured small gains on the outskirts of Severodonetsk in the last 24 hours but are unlikely to successfully surround the town.
- Russian forces continued assaults on the Azovstal plant, but ISW cannot confirm any specific advances. Likely widespread civilian resistance to the Russian occupation may additionally be disrupting previously announced Russian plans to conduct a Victory Day exhibition in Mariupol.
- There were no significant changes on the southern axis in the last 24 hours and Russian forces continued to reinforce their forward positions.
- ISW cannot confirm reports of a Ukrainian anti-ship missile strike on the *Admiral Makarov* at this time.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 5

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Mason Clark, and George Barros

May 5, 7:00 pm ET

The Ukrainian counteroffensive out of Kharkiv city may disrupt Russian forces northeast of Kharkiv and will likely force Russian forces to decide whether to reinforce positions near Kharkiv or risk losing most or all of their positions within artillery range of the city. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zalyzhnyi stated on May 5 that Ukrainian forces are transitioning to counteroffensive operations around Kharkiv and Izyum, the first direct Ukrainian military statement of a shift to offensive operations. Ukrainian forces did not make any confirmed advances in the last 24 hours but repelled Russian attempts to regain lost positions. Russian forces made few advances in continued attacks in eastern Ukraine, and Ukrainian forces may be able to build their ongoing counterattacks and successful repulse of Russian attacks along the Izyum axis into a wider counteroffensive to retake Russian-occupied territory in Kharkiv Oblast.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued ineffectual offensive operations in southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts without securing any significant territorial gains in the past 24 hours.
- Ukrainian officials and military officers confirmed that Russian forces have breached the Azovstal facility itself and confirmed that Ukrainian forces are losing ground. Russian forces will likely capture the facility in the coming days.
- Ukrainian offensive operations around Kharkiv likely intend to push Russian forces out of artillery range of Kharkiv city, force Russian units to redeploy from the Izyum axis, and potentially threaten Russian lines of communication.
- Russian forces conducted limited offensive operations toward Zaporizhia City but did not conduct any attacks in Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts in the last 24 hours. Ukrainian forces claimed to recapture additional territory west of Kherson, but ISW cannot independently confirm any advances.

## **Ukraine Invasion Update 25**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with AEI's Critical Threats Project

May 5, 2022

### **Key Takeaways April 22-May 4**

- The Kremlin is establishing economic, governmental, and informational control over occupied Ukrainian territory, indicating that Russia may be preparing to create a series of Russian proxy “people’s republics” and/or to directly annex some occupied Ukrainian territory.
- The Kremlin continues to falsely claim that Ukraine is stalling negotiations that the Kremlin is also not seriously pursuing.
- Ukraine may suspend negotiations entirely in the coming weeks in response to Russian-sponsored “independence referendums” in occupied Ukrainian territory.
- Russian forces are likely considering the use of chemical weapons to achieve battlefield advantages in the battle for Donbas.
- Russian false-flag attacks in Transnistria and missile attacks in Odesa likely do not indicate an imminent Russian escalation in Transnistria or Moldova. The Kremlin likely intends to pin Ukrainian forces in the south to prevent them from reinforcing eastern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin is likely attempting to consolidate control over and surveillance of Russian government officials.
- The Kremlin continues to project economic confidence to its domestic audience despite a Russian Central Bank report that Russia’s economy will constrict by 8-10% in 2022
- The Kremlin made an example out of Poland and Bulgaria by cutting off natural gas shipments in an attempt to coerce Germany, Italy, and other EU consumers of Russian natural gas to pay for their Russian gas imports in rubles, thereby propping up Russia’s sanctions-battered economy.
- NATO and EU countries continued supplying Ukraine with military assistance, including high-end capabilities to counter Russian aggression, as Sweden and Finland consider NATO membership.
- The Kremlin’s antisemitism may drive Israel away from its current neutral position on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 3**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

May 4, 7:15pm ET

**Ukrainian defenses have largely stalled Russian advances in Eastern Ukraine.** Russian troops conducted a number of unsuccessful attacks in Eastern Ukraine on May 4 and were unable to make any confirmed advances. Russian forces attacking south of Izyum appear increasingly unlikely to successfully encircle Ukrainian forces in the Rubizhne area. Ukrainian forces have so far prevented Russian forces from merging their offensives to the southeast of Izyum and the west of Lyman, Slovyansk, and Kramatorsk, as Russian forces likely intended.

**Russian forces reportedly entered the Azovstal Steel Plant – rather than its outskirts – for the first time on May 4.** The extent of this Russian advance remains unclear, and Russian forces likely face further costly fighting if they intend to clear the entire facility. The Kremlin likely hopes that the successful capture of Azovstal through a ground assault will cement the Kremlin’s growing effort to claim complete control of Mariupol by May 9, with Russian propagandists recently arriving in the city to set conditions for further claims of a Russian victory. The Kremlin likely intends to claim some sort of victory in Mariupol to present a success to the Russian people, though Russian forces are highly unlikely to halt offensive operations across Ukraine on this date.

**Russian forces intensified airstrikes against transportation infrastructure in Western Ukraine on May 4 but remain unable to interdict Western aid shipments to Ukraine.** Six Russian cruise missiles hit electrical substations near railway stations in Lviv and Transcarpathia (the southwestern Oblast of Ukraine) on May 4. A senior US defense official reported that Russian aircraft conducted 200 to 300 airstrikes largely targeting transportation infrastructure in the last 24 hours. The US official added that these Russian strikes are likely intended to disrupt Ukrainian transportation capabilities and slow down weapon re-supply efforts but have been unable to do so.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces engaged in several unsuccessful ground offensives to the south of Izyum and did not significantly advance efforts to encircle Ukrainian troops in the cauldron to the southeast of Izyum and west of the Donetsk-Luhansk frontline.
- Russian forces reportedly stormed the Azovstal Steel Plant on May 4 and are likely operating inside the plant's facilities.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources confirmed that a Ukrainian counteroffensive pushed Russian troops back 40 kilometers from Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted a number of unsuccessful counteroffensives on the southern axis.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 3

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 3, 6:45 pm ET

**Ukrainian officials reported with increasing confidence that the Kremlin will announce mobilization on May 9.** Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate Chief Kyrylo Budanov said on May 2 that the Kremlin has begun to prepare mobilization processes and personnel ahead of the expected May 9 announcement and has already carried out covert mobilization.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council said that high-ranking Russian officials are trying to legitimize a prolonged war effort as the Third World War against the West, rather than the "special military operation" against Ukraine, as Russian President Vladimir Putin has hitherto framed Russia's invasion.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW has no independent confirmation of Russian preparations for mobilization.

**A significant Ukrainian counteroffensive pushed Russian forces roughly 40 km east of Kharkiv City.**<sup>[3]</sup> A senior American defense official reported the Ukrainian operation, which is consistent with social media reports from both Ukrainian and Russian sources that Ukrainian troops took control of Staryi Saltiv on May 2.<sup>[4]</sup> This Ukrainian counteroffensive is very unlikely to affect Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum, as the Russians have not been relying on GLOCs from Kharkiv to support their operations in Izyum but have been using routes further to the east and well beyond the most recent Ukrainian counteroffensive's limit of advance. The Ukrainian counteroffensive may, however, unhinge the Russian positions northeast of Kharkiv and could set conditions for a broader operation to drive the Russians from most of their positions around the city. This possibility may pose a dilemma for the Russians—whether to reinforce their positions near Kharkiv to prevent such a broader Ukrainian operation or to risk losing most or all of their positions in artillery range of the city.

**Russia's long-term intentions regarding the status of Mariupol and other occupied areas seem confused.** Some anecdotes from Mariupol indicate that Russia may plan to incorporate Mariupol and the surrounding environs into the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), and possibly annex the DNR to the Russian Federation. Other anecdotes suggest that Russia could directly absorb Mariupol into Rostov Oblast. These inconsistencies could simply be artifacts of reporting or confusion on the ground, but they could also indicate actual confusion about Russia's long-term plans for governing the Ukrainian regions that Moscow's forces currently occupy. **These anecdotes clearly support the assessment that Putin has no intention of ceding occupied territories back to an independent Ukraine and is, at most, considering exactly how he intends to govern regions that Russia has illegally seized.**

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces resumed air, artillery, and ground assaults on the Azovstal Steel Plant following the conclusion of the May 2 evacuation efforts.
- Russian forces continued to regroup on the Donetsk-Luhansk axis in likely preparation for a westward advance in the direction of Lyman and Slovyansk.
- The Ukrainian Armed Forces conducted a counteroffensive that likely pushed Russian forces up to 40 km east of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground offensives in Zaporizhia Oblast in the vicinity of Huliapole and intensified reconnaissance operations in the vicinity of Odesa amid growing tensions in Transnistria.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 2, 5:15 pm ET

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in Ukraine on May 2. The April 30

Ukrainian artillery strike on the Russian command post in Izyum may be continuing to disrupt Russian

efforts on the Izyum axis. Russian troops on the Donetsk-Luhansk frontline and Southern Axis

continued to regroup, likely in preparation for renewed offensives or to resist or reverse Ukrainian

counter-offensives.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks along any axes of advance and instead shelled Ukrainian positions on the frontlines.
- The April 30 Ukrainian artillery strike on Russian command headquarters near Izyum likely disrupted Russian operations on the Izyum axis and may hinder Russian offensives from Izyum for the next few days.
- Russian forces on the Southern Axis continued to regroup and reconnoiter likely in preparation for ground assaults in the direction of Kryvyi Rih, Mykolaiv, and Zaporizhia.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 1

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 1, 6:15 ET

Russian forces are setting conditions to establish permanent control over the areas of southern Ukraine they currently occupy, either as nominally independent “People’s Republics” or by annexing them to Russia. Russian sources reported that stores in occupied Melitopol and Volnovakha are beginning to transition to using the Russian ruble.<sup>[1]</sup> British Defense Intelligence reported that the ruble will be used in Kherson City starting on May 1 as part of a 4-month currency transition scheme enacted by the occupation administration.<sup>[2]</sup> These measures, which are not necessary or normal in military occupation administrations, indicate that Russian President Vladimir Putin likely intends to retain control over these areas and that his ambitions are not confined to Donbas.

Western and Ukrainian sources claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin may announce a “general mobilization” of the Russian military on May 9th. British Defense Minister Ben Wallace claimed that Putin may make this announcement, although Wallace admitted this was a personal opinion and not based on intelligence.<sup>[3]</sup> Advisor to the Ukrainian President Mikhail Podolyak amplified Wallace’s claims and stated that a general mobilization on May 9 would be consistent with the economic imperatives faced by Russia as a result of the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW has no independent verification of these claims, which would not in any event generate large numbers of usable soldiers for many months.

**The Kremlin likely seeks to leverage its partners in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to evade Western sanctions.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russia is courting CSTO members to procure input goods and materials for dual-use technologies that Russia cannot directly purchase due to Western sanctions.<sup>[5]</sup> The GUR stated that this effort will increase CSTO members’ economic dependence on Russia and enable Russian sanction evasion by using third-party countries to re-export Russian products to international markets.<sup>[6]</sup> The GUR stated that the Russian Ulyanovsk Mechanical Plant is attempting to obtain German components needed for the production of Buk surface-to-air missile systems and Tunguska missiles via Kazakhstan. Western sanctions may need to target Russia’s partners in the CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union (EAU) customs union to prevent Russian sanctions evasion.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian occupying forces are setting conditions to allow Russia to permanently govern occupied areas in southern Ukraine, not just in Donbas.
- Ukrainian forces likely conducted a rocket artillery strike on a Russian command post in Izyum on April 30 that struck after Russian Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov had left but killed other senior Russian officers.
- Russian forces continue to make incremental advances moving southwestward in the direction of Lyman but are largely stalled against Ukrainian positions on the pre-February 24 frontline.
- Russian forces continued re-grouping and reconnaissance on the Southern Axis and did not make any confirmed advances.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Karolina Hird, and George Barros

April 30, 5:15pm ET

**Further Russian reinforcements to the Izyum axis are unlikely to enable stalled Russian forces to achieve substantial advances.** Elements of unspecified Eastern Military District units and several air-defense assets are reportedly deploying from Belgorod to the Izyum front to support likely degraded Russian units attempting to advance south of the city. These forces are unlikely to enable Russian forces to break the current deadlock, as Russian attacks remain confined to two major highways (toward Sloviansk and Barvinkove) and cannot leverage greater numbers. Several successful Ukrainian counterattacks out of Kharkiv city in the last 72 hours have additionally recaptured a ring of suburbs north and east of the city and may additionally force Russian forces to redeploy units intended for the Izyum axis to hold these positions. Russian forces appear increasingly unlikely to achieve any major advances in eastern Ukraine, and Ukrainian forces may be able to conduct wider counterattacks in the coming days.

#### Key Takeaways

- A Ukrainian counteroffensive out of Kharkiv City will likely alleviate pressure on parts of the city that have suffered the most from Russian shelling and may force Russian troops from Izyum to re-deploy northward to support forces maintaining the partial encirclement of Kharkiv.
- Additional Russian forces are deploying to the Izyum front but are unlikely to enable any major advances.
- Russian troops did not make any confirmed advances to the southwest or southeast of Izyum or to the west of the Donetsk-Luhansk frontline.

- Russian forces in Kherson are pausing major offensive operations to improve their tactical positions and regroup to prepare for a renewed offensive to capture the administrative borders of Kherson.
- Russian occupation forces in Mariupol announced plans to consolidate their control over the city and intend to return Ukrainian citizens forcibly deported into Russia at some point in the future.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, and George Barros

April 29, 6:15pm ET

**Russian forces made limited advances west of Severodonetsk on April 29 but remain stalled south of Izyum.** Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine are likely successfully conducting a maneuver defense rather than holding static positions, redeploying mechanized reserves to resist attempted Russian advances. Concentrated Russian artillery is enabling minor Russian advances, but Ukrainian positions remain strong. Limited Ukrainian counterattacks around Kharkiv city may additionally force Russian forces to redeploy units intended for the Izyum axis to hold these positions.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces likely intend to leave a minimal force in Mariupol necessary to block Ukrainian positions in Azovstal and prevent partisan actions and are deploying as much combat power as possible to support offensive operations elsewhere.
- Ukrainian forces are successfully slowing Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine, which secured only minor advances west of Severodonetsk and did not advance on the Izyum front in the last 24 hours.
- Ukrainian counterattacks in Kharkiv are unlikely to develop into a major counteroffensive in the coming days but may force Russia to redeploy forces intended for the Izyum axis to hold their defensive positions around the city.
- Ukrainian intelligence continued to warn that Russian false flag attacks in Transnistria are intended to draw Transnistria into the war in some capacity and coerce Moldova to abandon pro-European policies.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

April 28, 5:45pm ET

**Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine made minor advances on April 28.** Russian forces attacking southwest from Izyum likely seek to bypass Ukrainian defenses on the direct road to Slovyansk. Russian forces continued shelling and minor attacks along the line of contact in eastern Ukraine but did not secure any gains in the past 24 hours. Additional Russian reinforcements continue to deploy to Belgorod to support the Izyum advance. Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant continue to hold out against heavy Russian artillery and aerial bombardment, including the likely use of multi-ton "bunker-buster" bombs against a Ukrainian field hospital.

**Ukrainian news outlet Defense Express reported on April 27 that Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov will take personal command of the Russian offensive in the Izyum direction.[1]** Citing unspecified Ukrainian military sources, Defense Express stated that Gerasimov is already in-theater and will command the offensive "at the operational and tactical level" and claimed the Russian military failed to create a single command structure under Southern Military District Commander Alexander Dvornikov. ISW cannot independently confirm this report. However, ISW previously assessed that Dvornikov's appointment as overall commander in Ukraine would not solve Russia's command and control challenges and likely strain his span of control.[2] If confirmed, the appointment of Russia's senior general officer to command tactical operations indicates both the importance of the Izyum drive to Russia's war in Ukraine and the breakdown in the Russian military's normal chain of command.

## Key Takeaways

- Russian strategic bombers likely targeted a Ukrainian field hospital in the Azovstal Steel Plant. The remaining Ukrainian defenders are likely running low on supplies.
- Russian attacks southwest of Izyum likely seek to outflank Ukrainian defenses on the direct road to Slovyansk and have made tactical gains in the last 24 hours.
- Russian forces continued tactical ground attacks and shelling along the entire line of contact in eastern Ukraine but did not secure any major advances.
- Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin stated that the DNR will postpone local Victory Day celebrations planned for May 9 until "the complete victory and the expansion of the DNR" to control Donetsk Oblast, though the Kremlin remains likely to attempt to claim some sort of victory on May 9.
- Russian forces conducted several locally successful attacks from Kherson toward Mykolaiv.
- Russian and proxy forces continued to mobilize in Transnistria and set conditions for a false flag attack.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

April 27, 8pm ET

**Russian forces made minor but steady advances both from Izyum and in continued assaults along the line of contact in eastern Ukraine on April 27.** Russian forces took several small towns directly west of Izyum in the past 24 hours. While this line of advance takes Russian forces away from their main objective of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, they likely intend to outflank Ukrainian defensive positions on the highways to Barvinkove and Slovyansk. Russian forces made several small advances in eastern Ukraine; Russia's increasing concentration of artillery assets is likely enabling these tactical advances. Russian forces are advancing methodically in several sectors but have achieved no notable breakthroughs. The capability of Russian forces to encircle large groups of Ukrainian forces remains in doubt.

**The Kremlin continued to prepare for a likely false-flag missile attack against the Moldovan territory of Transnistria, which is illegally occupied by Russian forces.** Russian proxies in Transnistria falsely claimed Ukrainian forces are preparing to attack Transnistria, and Ukrainian intelligence reported Russian forces are preparing to conduct a missile strike on Transnistria and blame Ukraine. Russian and Transnistrian forces also increased their readiness for possible operations in the last 24 hours. Russia may intend to involve Transnistria in the war in Ukraine to utilize Transnistria's (limited) reserve forces or to launch attacks and shell Ukraine from Transnistrian territory. The Kremlin may alternatively seek to destabilize Moldova itself to raise tensions in Moldova and neighboring Romania and put additional pressure on NATO, possibly seeking to reduce Western military support to Ukraine either by diverting NATO forces to Romania or threatening a wider escalation.

**Russian forces are stepping up "filtration measures" in occupied territories and abducting Ukrainian citizens, likely for use in future prisoner exchanges.** Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on April 27 that Russian forces are conducting large-scale "filtration measures" in Kharkiv, Zaporizhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk Oblasts.<sup>[1]</sup> The "filtration" targets men of military age, former military and law enforcement personnel, and pro-Ukrainian activists for interrogation, torture, and possible execution. The GUR reported Russian forces are additionally shipping Ukrainian hostages to Crimea to "replenish the exchange fund," seeking to exchange Ukrainian civilians for Russian military prisoners in future prisoner swaps. The GUR additionally speculated that Russian forces may be preparing to use Ukrainian civilians to portray Prisoners of War in May 9th Victory Day celebrations, noting that Russian forces conducted similar propaganda efforts in Donetsk in 2014.

**Ukrainian forces likely conducted drone or possibly missile strikes on Russian logistics centers in Belgorod and Voronezh on April 27.** Russian sources and social media reported multiple explosions early on April 27, which Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Mikhail Podolyak later euphemistically confirmed were Ukrainian strikes, stating Russian cities cannot "sit out" the invasion of Ukraine and "the disarmament of the Belgorod-Voronezh warehouses is a natural

process."<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian forces will likely conduct further cross-border strikes to disrupt Russian logistics, which the Kremlin will likely falsely frame as an escalation or somehow a war crime.

#### Key Takeaways

- Concentrated artillery is likely enabling limited Russian advances in eastern Ukraine, though Russian forces continue to struggle to break through prepared Ukrainian defenses.
- Russian forces funneled additional reinforcements and tactical missile units into the Izyum front and made minor advances. Russian forces are likely attempting to bypass Ukrainian forces on the road to Barvinkove by advancing directly west before pivoting southwards in the coming days.
- Heavy Russian bombardment and continued assaults failed to make headway against Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol's Azovstal plant, even as Russian forces reportedly prepared to stage a press tour in the occupied areas of the city on April 28.
- Russian forces around Kherson are likely preparing for a renewed push to capture the entirety of Kherson Oblast in the coming days but Ukrainian counterattacks continue to disrupt Russian operations in the area.
- Russian occupation forces continued preparations to announce the creation of a Russian proxy "Kherson People's Republic" (KNR) amid widespread Ukrainian resistance.
- The Kremlin may be preparing to either bring Transnistria into the war in Ukraine or destabilize Moldova itself to put additional pressure on NATO.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 26, 6:30 pm ET

Russian forces have adopted a sounder pattern of operational movement in eastern Ukraine, at least along the line from Izyum to Rubizhne. Russian troops are pushing down multiple roughly parallel roads within supporting distance of one another, allowing them to bring more combat power to bear than their previous practice had supported. Russian troops on this line are making better progress than any other Russian advances in this phase of the war. They are pushing from Izyum southwest toward Barvinkove and southeast toward Slovyansk. They are also pushing several columns west and south of Rubizhne, likely intending to encircle it and complete its capture. The Russian advances even in this area are proceeding methodically rather than rapidly, however, and it is not clear how far they will be able to drive or whether they will be able to encircle Ukrainian forces in large numbers.

**Russian forces on the Izyum axis likely benefit from the absence of prepared Ukrainian defensive positions against attacks from the Kharkiv direction toward Donbas.** Ukraine has prepared to defend the line of contact with Russian-occupied Donbas since 2014, and Russian troops continue to struggle to penetrate those prepared defenses—as shown by repeated Russian efforts to take Avdiivka, just north of Donetsk City, or to advance through Popasna, just beyond the original line of contact.

**Russian troops continued to attack Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol, including in the Azovstal Plant, despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's claims that there is no more fighting in the city.** Ukrainian forces likely still hold important positions beyond the plant itself, and Russian forces continue to fight outside the plant, bomb the plant, and assault positions near the plant. Putin's order not to chase Ukrainian defenders into the tunnels and catacombs of the facility evidently did not preclude continued efforts to secure at least the entire perimeter of the plant and likely also the important M14 highway that runs along it to the north and northwest.

**Russia is staging false-flag attacks in Transnistria, Moldova, likely setting conditions for further actions on that front.** The two motorized rifle battalions Russia has illegally maintained in Transnistria since the end of the Cold War are not likely sufficient to mount a credible attack on Odesa by themselves, nor are the Russians likely to be able to reinforce them enough to allow them to do so.

They could support more limited attacks to the northwest of Odesa, possibly causing panic and creating psychological effects to benefit Russian operations in the south of Ukraine.

**Russia may also seek to destabilize Moldova itself, however.** Comments by the head of the Donetsk People's Republic and other Russian officials and proxies raise the possibility that Putin might recognize the self-styled Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) in Transnistria as he recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. The PMR could then ask for additional Russian protection, and Putin could attempt to send some additional forces or capabilities to Transnistria. Any such activities would greatly raise tensions and fears in Moldova and neighboring Romania, putting additional pressure on NATO, possibly giving Putin a cheap "win," and distracting from Russia's slog in eastern Ukraine.

Continued indications that Russian forces intend to hold referenda to establish "people's republics" in occupied areas of southern Ukraine raise the possibility that Putin intends to unveil an array of new "independent" "people's republics" as part of a Victory Day celebration. The forecast cone is wide, and there is as yet no solid basis to assess one path as much more likely than another. But the false-flag attacks and Russian and Russian proxy reactions to them are alarming, and it behooves NATO and the West to consider the most dangerous courses of action and prepare to meet them.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continue to make slow but steady progress south from Izyum and northwest of Rubizhne, but Russian offensive operations elsewhere along the line in eastern Ukraine remain unsuccessful.
- Fighting continues in Mariupol, where Ukrainian defenders apparently still hold positions beyond the Azovstal Plant.
- Russia and/or Russian proxies have staged false-flag attacks in Russian-occupied Transnistria, possibly to threaten a (very likely unsuccessful) attack on Odesa, possibly to destabilize Moldova.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 25, 5:00 pm ET

**Russian forces conducted precision missile strikes against five Ukrainian railway stations in central and western Ukraine on April 25 in a likely effort to disrupt Ukrainian reinforcements to eastern Ukraine and Western aid shipments.** A series of likely coordinated Russian missile strikes conducted within an hour of one another early on April 25 hit critical transportation infrastructure in Vinnytsia, Poltava, Khmelnytskyi, Rivne, and Zhytomyr oblasts.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces seek to disrupt Ukrainian reinforcements and logistics. The Kremlin may have additionally conducted this series of strikes—an abnormal number of precision missile strikes for one day—to demonstrate Russia's ability to hit targets in Western Ukraine and to disrupt western aid shipments after US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's surprise visit to Kyiv over the weekend. However, Russian precision strike capabilities will remain limited and unlikely to decisively affect the course of the war; open-source research organization Bellingcat reported on April 24 that Russia has likely used 70% of its total stockpile of precision missiles to date.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Local Ukrainian counterattacks retook territory north of Kherson and west of Izyum in the past 24 hours. Russian forces continue to make little progress in scattered, small-scale attacks in eastern Ukraine.** Ukrainian forces are successfully halting Russian efforts to bypass Ukrainian defensive positions around Izyum, and Russian forces are struggling to complete even tactical encirclements. Local Ukrainian counterattacks in Kherson Oblast are unlikely to develop into a larger counteroffensive in the near term but are disrupting Russian efforts to completely capture Kherson Oblast and are likely acting as a drain on Russian combat power that could otherwise support Russia's main effort in eastern Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces resumed ground attacks against Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant in the last 24 hours. Russian officers may assess they will be unable to starve out the remaining defenders by May 9 (a possible self-imposed deadline to complete the capture

of Mariupol). Russian forces will likely take high casualties if they resume major ground assaults to clear the facility.

- Russian forces are accelerating efforts to secure occupied Mariupol but will likely face widespread Ukrainian resistance.
- Continued Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine took little to no additional territory in the past 24 hours.
- Prudent tactical Ukrainian counterattacks around Izyum are likely impeding Russian efforts to complete even tactical encirclements of Ukrainian forces.
- Russian forces are preparing for renewed attacks to capture the entirety of Kherson Oblast in southern Ukraine after minor losses in the past 48 hours.
- Russian forces likely conducted a false flag attack in Transnistria (Russia's illegally occupied territory in Moldova) to amplify Russian claims of anti-Russian sentiment in Moldova, but Transnistrian forces remain unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark and Kateryna Stepanenko

April 24, 3:00 pm ET

Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine made minor advances around Severodonetsk on April 24, seizing several small towns and establishing a pontoon bridge across the Krasna River west of Severodonetsk. Russia's offensive in eastern Ukraine continues to follow the pattern of their operations throughout the war, using small units to conduct dispersed attacks along multiple axes rather than taking the pauses necessary to prepare for decisive operations. Russian forces continued to bombard the remaining Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant and may be preparing for renewed assaults on the facility, which would likely lead to high Russian casualties. The military situation in southern Ukraine did not change in the last 24 hours.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to pressure Ukrainian defenders in the Azovstal facility in Mariupol.
- Ukrainian sources report that Russian troops are preparing to conduct renewed assaults on Azovstal that would likely prove costly—possibly to meet a Kremlin-imposed deadline to clear Mariupol—but ISW cannot independently confirm these reports.
- Russian forces secured limited gains northwest of Severodonetsk but remain unlikely to be able to launch massed offensive operations.
- Additional Russian forces are deploying to reinforce unsuccessful attacks on the Izyum front.
- Ukrainian civilians in occupied Kharkiv Oblast are reportedly organizing volunteer movements to resist Russian occupation measures, similar to previously documented actions in southern Ukraine.

**CORRECTION:** ISW mistakenly reported on April 23 that Russian troops seized Lozova, Kharkiv Oblast, approximately 100km west of Izyum. Russian troops actually seized Lozova, Donetsk Oblast, approximately 35km east of Izyum. We apologize for the error.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 23, 6:30 pm ET

Russian forces continued offensive operations along multiple axes even as they completed moving reinforcements drawn from the retreat from Kyiv into the east and continued redeploying some forces from Mariupol to the north. The Russians have not taken time to refit troops moving from Kyiv or Mariupol before recommitting them to combat operations. They are not

pausing offensive operations to wait until they have concentrated overwhelming combat power, and they do not appear to be massing forces on a few decisive axes of advance. They are continuing the pattern of operations they have followed throughout the war: committing small collections of units to widely dispersed attacks along multiple axes and refusing to accept necessary operational pauses to set conditions for decisive operations.

**Russian forces have thus far only committed a handful of battalion tactical groups (BTGs) to offensive operations in their various sectors, however, and could still launch a massed offensive operation.** We assess that such an operation is unlikely given observed patterns and the inherent limitations of available actual combat power in troops that have fought hard and suffered many casualties, as well as observed challenges with command-and-control at the regiment/brigade and division level. It is possible that the Russians are addressing or attempting to address some of those challenges and will soon launch an offensive in a new and better-coordinated form, but it remains unlikely.

**The objectives of Russian offensives around the Izyum-Donetsk City salient are unclear.** Russian forces may seek to reach the Izyum-Debaltsev road along two or more axes to encircle a large concentration of Ukrainian forces and built-up areas. Ukrainian officials suggested on April 23 that Russian forces near Rubizhne and Popasna may seek to encircle the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area rather than pursue the deeper envelopment.<sup>[1]</sup> It is too soon to evaluate the likelihood of this Russian course of action or the probability of its success.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued their pressure on the Azovstal facility in Mariupol.
- Russian troops drawn from the retreat from Kyiv are re-entering combat in eastern Ukraine.
- Russian forces from around Mariupol are redeploying to the vicinity of Donetsk City and are likely to enter combat again soon and without rest or refit.
- Russia continued conducting small-scale ground offensives at multiple points along the front from Izyum to Zaporizhia Oblast.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 22, 5:30pm ET

A briefing by the Russian Deputy Commander of the Central Military District on April 22 reiterated standing Russian objectives in eastern and southern Ukraine and did not announce any new operations. Deputy Commander of the Central Military District Rustam Minnekaev gave a speech to the annual meeting of the Union of Defense Industries on April 22 that has been misinterpreted as the announcement of a new Russian campaign.<sup>[1]</sup> Minnekaev said Russian forces began a new phase of the war two days ago, an unsurprising confirmation of the new phase of the Russian offensive announced by both Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ukrainian officials on April 19.<sup>[2]</sup> He stated the primary objective of Russian forces is to capture the entirety of the Donbas region and southern Ukraine to provide a land bridge to Crimea; as ISW has previously assessed, Russian forces seek to capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and retain control of the Kherson region.

Minnekaev stated that Russian control of southern Ukraine provides Russia a *future capability to conduct an offensive toward Transnistria, rather than announcing an imminent Russian offensive toward Moldova*. Minnekaev said Russian control of southern Ukraine will provide “another way out to Transnistria,” the illegally Russian-occupied strip of territory in Moldova, where he falsely claimed “there are also facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population.” We do not read this as a statement of intent to conduct a major offensive operation toward Moldova. An offensive toward Moldova would likely have been phrased around securing a “land corridor” [сухопутный коридор] to Moldova, much like the Russian land corridor to Crimea. Even if Russian forces did seek to resume

major offensive operations toward Mykolaiv and on to Odesa, they are highly unlikely to have the capability to do so.

#### Key Takeaways

- A briefing by the Deputy Commander of the Central Military District restated the standing Russian objectives in the current phase of the war: capturing the entirety of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and defending Russian positions in southern Ukraine against Ukrainian counterattacks.
- Ongoing purges of Russian general officers for failures in Ukraine will likely further degrade Russian command and control.
- Russian forces seek to starve out the remaining defenders and civilians in Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant and are unlikely to allow trapped civilians to leave.
- Russian forces conducted localized attacks and reconnoitered Ukrainian positions south of Izyum and did not make any advances.
- Russian forces secured minor gains in continuing daily attacks on the line of contact in eastern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin is setting conditions to create proxy republics in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts to cement Russian control over these regions and conscript Ukrainian manpower.

#### Ukraine Invasion Update 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

April 22, 2022

The Ukraine Invasion Update is a weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from April 15-21. All of the ISW Russia's team's coverage of the war in Ukraine—including daily military assessments and maps, past Conflict Updates, and several supplemental assessments—are available on our [Ukraine Crisis Coverage](#) landing page.

#### Key Takeaways April 15-21

- Russia and Ukraine are unlikely to resume negotiations in the coming weeks. Both sides await the outcome of Russia's ongoing offensive in eastern Ukraine. Kyiv likely assesses that its military has the potential to push Russian forces back to their pre-February 24 positions and is unlikely to engage in negotiations until that outcome occurs or becomes significantly less likely.
- The Kremlin is increasingly describing the war in Ukraine as a war with NATO to the domestic Russian audience to explain slower-than-intended operations and mounting casualties.
- The Kremlin likely intends to create one or more proxy states in occupied southern Ukraine to cement its military occupation and set conditions to demand permanent control over these regions.
- Russian and Belarusian officials seek to frame Western sanctions as predominantly harming European economies while playing up the efficacy of their sanction-mitigation efforts.
- The Kremlin is failing to deter NATO expansion and failing to disrupt Ukraine's military alignment with the West.
- The Kremlin remains unlikely to use a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine in this phase of the war.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

April 21, 6:45pm ET

The Kremlin declared victory in the battle of Mariupol. Russian forces will attempt to starve out remaining Ukrainian defenders in the Azovstal Steel Plant rather than clear it through likely costly assaults. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu declared victory in the battle of Mariupol on April 21 despite the continued presence of Ukrainian forces in Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant. In a staged, televised meeting, Putin ordered Shoigu to halt assaults on the plant to limit Russian casualties, claiming Russian forces have already captured the entirety of the city. The Kremlin will spin the (still incomplete) capture of Mariupol into a major victory in Ukraine to compensate for stalled or failed Russian offensives elsewhere.

The Kremlin's reduction of the pace of operations in Mariupol is unlikely to enable the deployment of significant combat power to support other offensive operations in the coming days and weeks. Statements from US officials that Russia has not yet removed a dozen battalion tactical groups (BTGs) from Mariupol despite Putin's claimed victory do not capture either the status of these Russian forces or other constraints on their use.<sup>[1]</sup> ISW has consistently assessed that Russian BTGs have taken high casualties in the battle of Mariupol, are degraded, and are unlikely to possess their full complement of personnel (800-900 at full strength). As with Russian operations elsewhere in Ukraine, reporting on numbers of BTGs without additional context and analysis of the *combat power* of these units is not a useful evaluation of Russian forces. While it is unlikely that all 12 reported BTGs were involved in the final fighting around the Azovstal plant, it will still take some time for those units that were engaged in final assaults to disengage for redeployment elsewhere. Some portion of these Russian forces will be necessary for several other missions—including maintaining the siege of the Azovstal plant, securing the rest of Mariupol against any remaining pockets of Ukrainian forces and likely partisan actions, and possibly redeploying to support Russian forces maintaining control of southern Ukraine. **Russian forces will certainly be able to redeploy some units from Mariupol to offensive operations elsewhere—but Ukrainian forces have succeeded in tying down and degrading a substantial Russian force, and the Kremlin's declaration of victory has not inherently freed up 12 BTGs worth of combat power for other operations.**

#### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin's declaration of victory in Mariupol is unlikely to enable the deployment of significant combat power to reinforce offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in the coming days or weeks.
- Russian forces involved in the battle of Mariupol are likely heavily damaged and Ukrainian forces succeeded in tying down and degrading a substantial Russian force.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in eastern Ukraine but made only marginal gains.
- Ukrainian forces continued to halt Russian attacks around Izyum.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird

April 20, 6pm ET

Russian forces made minor advances in the ongoing offensive in eastern Ukraine on April 19, seizing several small towns and advancing into the key frontline towns of Rubizhne and Popasna. Russian forces continued major assaults with heavy air and artillery support but are continuing to build the logistics and command-and-control capabilities necessary for a larger offensive. Russian forces have not achieved any major breakthroughs, nor have they demonstrated any new capability to conduct multiple successful, simultaneous advances. Russian forces additionally made grinding progress against remaining Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Works and announced plans for a May 9 Victory Day parade in the city – indicating Russian forces will declare victory in Mariupol by that date at the latest.

#### Key Takeaways

Russia's offensive in eastern Ukraine secured minor gains in the last 24 hours, taking parts of the key frontline towns of Rubizhne and Popasna.

- Ukrainian forces reported the presence of small numbers of Syrian or Libyan mercenaries fighting in Popasna (eastern Ukraine), likely individual recruits fighting under the umbrella of the Wagner Group rather than larger units.
- Russian forces made incremental advances in Mariupol and continued to set conditions to declare victory in the city by –at the latest – May 9.
- Russian forces made minor advances around Izyum but have not secured any major breakthroughs.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 19, 5:30 pm ET

**Russian and Ukrainian officials announced that the next phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on April 19. Russian forces conducted intensive artillery and air bombardments of many areas along the front line from around Izyum to Mykolaiv but relatively few ground offensive operations.** Russian forces continue to receive personnel and equipment reinforcements as well as command-and-control and logistics capabilities even as they conduct air and artillery preparations and some mechanized advances.

**The Russians have not fully set conditions for a large-scale offensive operation.** The Russians have not had enough time to reconstitute forces withdrawn from the Battle of Kyiv and ready them properly for a new offensive in the east. The Russians appear to be still building logistics and command-and-control capabilities even as they start the next round of major fighting. The tempo of Russian operations continues to suggest that President Vladimir Putin is demanding a hasty offensive to achieve his stated objectives, possibly by "Victory Day" on May 9. The haste and partial preparation of the Russian attack will likely undermine its effectiveness and may compromise its success.

**Russian forces appear to be attempting to conduct a wide encirclement of Ukrainian troops along axes from Izyum to the southeast and from Donetsk City to the north even as they push west from Popasna and positions north of Severodonetsk.** Russian ground offensives in the last 24 hours occurred around Izyum, Kreminna (north of Severodonetsk), and from Donetsk City toward Avdiivka. Only the advance to and possibly through Kreminna made significant progress. An encirclement on this scale would likely take considerable time to complete against Ukrainian resistance. Even if the Russians did complete such an encirclement and trapped a large concentration of Ukrainian forces inside one or more pockets, the Ukrainian defenders would likely be able to hold out for a considerable period and might well be able to break out.

**The Russians may alternatively try to complete several smaller encirclements simultaneously, each trapping fewer Ukrainian forces and therefore taking less time to complete and then reduce.** Coordinating such operations is complicated and beyond the planning and execution capacities the Russian army has demonstrated in the conflict thus far.

**Ukrainian forces continue to defend parts of the Azovstal complex in Mariupol, but Russian officials and media are gathering in and near the city, likely in preparation to declare victory in the coming days whether or not fighting continues.**

### Key Takeaways

- The next phase of the Russian offensive in Ukraine's east has reportedly begun, largely with artillery and air bombardments supporting a few small-scale ground offensives.
- Russian officials and media are likely preparing to declare victory in Mariupol in the coming days, possibly before Ukrainian forces in the Azovstal facility have been fully defeated.
- The Russians may be attempting a single wide encirclement of Ukrainian forces from Izyum to Donetsk City or a series of smaller encirclements within that arc. It is too soon to assess the intended Russian scheme of maneuver.
- Russian operations continue to proceed hastily, as if President Vladimir Putin has set an arbitrary date by which they must succeed. Putin may have decided that he will announce a Russian success and the completion of the operation on Victory Day, May 9.

The haste with which Russian forces are moving may compromise the success of their operations.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 18, 6:30pm ET

**Russian forces began a new phase of large-scale offensive operations in eastern Ukraine on April 18 likely intended to capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.** Russian forces have been concentrating reinforcements—including both newly-deployed units and damaged units withdrawn from northeastern Ukraine—to the Donbas axis for several weeks. Russian forces conducted large-scale assaults focused on Rubizhne, Popasna, and Marinka with heavy artillery support on April 18 after previously conducting only localized attacks and shelling along the line of contact. Russian forces have not secured any major territorial gains as of publication.

**The Russian offensive in the east is unlikely to be dramatically more successful than previous Russian offensives, but Russian forces may be able to wear down Ukrainian defenders or achieve limited gains.** Russian forces did not take the operational pause that was likely necessary to reconstitute and properly integrate damaged units withdrawn from northeastern Ukraine into operations in eastern Ukraine. As we have assessed previously, Russian forces withdrawn from around Kyiv and going back to fight in Donbas have, at best, been patched up and filled out with soldiers from other damaged units, and the Russian military has few, if any, cohesive units not previously deployed to Ukraine to funnel into new operations.<sup>[1]</sup> Frequent reports of disastrously low Russian morale and continuing logistics challenges indicate the effective combat power of Russian units in eastern Ukraine is a fraction of their on-paper strength in numbers of battalion tactical groups (BTGs). Russian forces may certainly be able to wear down Ukrainian positions in eastern Ukraine through the heavy concentration of firepower and sheer weight of numbers, but likely at a high cost. A sudden and dramatic Russian offensive success remains highly unlikely, however, and Ukrainian tactical losses would not spell the end of the campaign in eastern Ukraine, much less the war as a whole.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces likely began large-scale offensive operations in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts focused on Rubizhne, Popasna, and Marinka.
- Russian forces may be able to gain ground through the heavy concentration of artillery and numbers. However, Russian operations are unlikely to be dramatically more successful than previous major offensives around Kyiv. The Russian military is unlikely to have addressed the root causes—poor coordination, the inability to conduct cross-country operations, and low morale—that impeded prior offensives.
- Successful Ukrainian counterattacks southeast of Kharkiv will likely force Russian forces to divert some units intended for the Izyum offensive, but Ukrainian forces are unlikely to completely sever Russian lines of communication north of Izyum in the coming days.
- Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol continued to hold out against heavy Russian artillery and air bombardment.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark and George Barros  
April 17, 3pm ET

Russian forces likely captured the Port of Mariupol on April 16 despite Ukrainian General Staff denials, reducing organized Ukrainian resistance in the city to the Azovstal factory in eastern Mariupol. Russian and DNR forces released footage on April 16 confirming their presence in several key locations in southwestern Mariupol, including the port itself. Isolated groups of Ukrainian troops may remain active in Mariupol outside of the Azovstal factory, but they will likely be cleared out by

Russian forces in the coming days. Russian forces likely seek to force the remaining defenders of the Azovstal factory to capitulate through overwhelming firepower to avoid costly clearing operations, but remaining Ukrainian defenders appear intent on staging a final stand. Russian forces will likely complete the capture of Mariupol in the coming week, but final assaults will likely continue to cost them dearly.

**Russian forces continued to amass on the Izyum axis and in eastern Ukraine, increasingly including low-quality proxy conscripts, in parallel with continuous – and unsuccessful – small-scale attacks.** Russian forces did not take any territory on the Izyum axis or in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts in the past 24 hours. Russian forces deploying to eastern Ukraine reportedly continue to face significant morale and supply issues and appear unlikely to intend, or be able to, conduct a major offensive surge in the coming days. Deputy Ukrainian Minister of Defense Anna Malyar stated on April 17 that the Russian military is in no hurry to launch an offensive in eastern Ukraine, having learned from their experience from Kyiv – but Russian forces continue localized attacks and are likely unable to amass the cohesive combat power necessary for a major breakthrough.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces likely captured the Port of Mariupol on April 16 despite Ukrainian General Staff denials.
- Russian forces likely seek to force the remaining defenders of the Azovstal factory to capitulate through overwhelming firepower to avoid costly clearing operations, but remaining Ukrainian defenders appear intent on staging a final stand.
- Evgeny Prigozhin, financier of the Wagner Group, is likely active on the ground in eastern Ukraine to coordinate Wagner Group recruitment and funding.
- Russian forces continued their build up around Izyum but did not conduct any offensive operations.

The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on April 16 that the Kremlin is increasingly arresting Russian and proxy officers for failures in Ukraine. The GUR reported Russian military authorities established a commission intended to run from March 2 to April 24 in occupied Horlivka to identify the reasons for personnel shortages among Russian forces. The GUR reported that Russian investigators discovered the commanders of Russia's 3rd Motor Rifle Brigade was 100% staffed at the beginning of the invasion when it in fact only had 55% of its personnel and arrested two battalion commanders in the brigade. The GUR also reported the FSB arrested DNR Defense Spokesperson Eduard Basurin for his "careless statement" on April 11 revealing Russian intent to use chemical weapons in Mariupol, though there is still no independent confirmation of the Ukrainian claim of Russian chemical weapons use.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 16

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 16, 5:00 pm ET

Ukraine's sinking of the *Moskva* was a significant event that has likely triggered intensified Russian air and missile attacks in retaliation, but the decisive operations of this phase of the war will still be conducted on the ground in eastern Ukraine. The commitment of the Black Sea Fleet's naval infantry to the fight around Mariupol some weeks ago meant that Russian naval operations would play a supporting role in the conflict. Increased Russian air and missile attacks are also unlikely to have a decisive impact on the outcome of the war, since there is no reason to assess that Russia has been holding enough air and missile capability in reserve to tip the balance if it is now committed. This report, and likely future reports as well, will thus remain focused on the ground operations, especially those in eastern Ukraine.

**Russian forces continued to amass troops around Izyum in preparation for continuing offensive operations in eastern Ukraine.** The Russians continued small-scale attacks in the vicinities of Izyum, Popasna, and the area around Rubizhne and Severodonetsk—sometimes with artillery, sometimes with mechanized forces. These attacks have not made significant gains so far. It is unclear if they are part of a rolling offensive operation into which Russian reinforcements will be fed as they become available or if they are setting conditions for a larger-scale, better-coordinated offensive that will start soon.

**The specific terrain on which battles in eastern Ukraine will be fought may constrain the Russians' ability to take advantage of the number of forces they are amassing for the attack.** Eastern Ukraine is famous for being superb terrain for large-scale mechanized maneuver because of the World War II campaigns of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army. It is far from clear, however, that Russian forces will find it much more conducive to rapid decisive mechanized operations than other parts of the theater. The Russians have struggled repeatedly to seize built-up areas rapidly or even to reduce them once encircled. They will have to seize several significant population centers to achieve their apparent objectives in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, however, including Severodonetsk, Rubizhne, Lysychansk, Slovyansk, and Kramatorsk, as well as several smaller towns. The difficulties they have encountered taking Rubizhne do not bode well for their rapid success against other built-up areas. The ground itself is also challenging as it is crisscrossed by many small water features and, at the moment, still very muddy. The reinforcements the Russians are bringing into this part of the theater will help, of course, but large numbers of much fresher Russian troops struggled to take relatively small population centers north, west, and northeast of Kyiv even before getting into the Kyiv suburbs proper. The Russians must take the major population centers in Donetsk and Luhansk, however, if they are to achieve the operation's stated goals.

**Russian forces will likely continue operating along three primary axes of advance in Donbas: from Izyum south via Slovyansk toward Russian-controlled Donetsk Oblast near Debaltseve; from Rubizhne and Severodonetsk southwest toward the Izyum-Debaltseve highway; and from Popasna west toward that highway. They may open an additional axis of advance from near Donetsk City to the north toward Kramatorsk as well, according to the Ukrainian General Staff.**

[1] The Russian main effort currently appears to be from Izyum southeast along the highway to Slovyansk. The drive west from Popasna is presumably meant to reach the Izyum-Debaltseve highway, possibly setting conditions to encircle or drive off Ukrainian forces defending against a Russian advance from the Debaltseve area to the northwest. The purpose of the direct assaults on Severodonetsk and Rubizhne is less clear. The Russians may be trying to seize those cities as part of the objective to seize Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, rather than waiting until they have been encircled and trying to reduce them at that point. They may alternatively be seeking to fix Ukrainian forces in that northeastern sector of the salient the Russians intend to encircle. The general pattern of operations and apparent movements of Russian reinforcements suggest that the drive from Izyum to the southwest will be the main effort in this part of the theater but that the Russians will continue to attack on multiple axes that are not immediately mutually supporting.

**Ukrainian officials report that Russia has concentrated as many as 22 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the vicinity of Izyum, but the Russians will struggle to take advantage of that force concentration if they cannot open up parallel axes of advance—something they have notably struggled to do in other parts of the theater.** Russian forces are apparently attempting to drive southwest from Izyum toward Barvinkove, which could allow them to open up an axis of advance in addition to the main Izyum-Slovyansk highway. But Barvinkove is a large enough settlement to delay the Russian advance if Ukrainian forces hold it, and the route from Izyum to Barvinkove is not really parallel to the Izyum-Slovyansk highway—Barvinkove is roughly 50 kilometers west of Slovyansk. Taking Barvinkove does not cut the only Ukrainian ground line of communication (GLOC) to Slovyansk, moreover, as another main GLOC to Slovyansk from the west runs through Kramatorsk, about 45 kilometers southeast of Barvinkove.

**The individual Russian offensives in the east are thus unlikely to proceed dramatically more successfully than similar operations around Kyiv unless the Russians change their operational patterns significantly. The Russians could overwhelm the Ukrainian defenders by the sheer number of different axes of advance forcing the Ukrainians to spread themselves too thinly. But the Ukrainians' demonstrated will and ability to hold much larger Russian forces at bay in built-up areas for a considerable time suggests that many if not most or even all of these Russian drives will stall. This discussion does not take account of the quality and physical and psychological state of the Russian forces, which we have considered in detail in previous reports, and which makes a sudden dramatic Russian offensive success even less likely.**

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russians and their proxies appear to be preparing to declare victory in the Battle of Mariupol, as Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin opened a United Russia party office in the city.
- Russian reinforcements drawn from troops that had fought around Kyiv have appeared in eastern Ukraine. Those reinforcements have not received sufficient time to recover physically or mentally from their losses and defeat around Kyiv and are unlikely to generate combat power proportionate to their numbers.

- Ukrainian officials claim that the Russians canceled the deployment to Syria of one of the last combat units that had not previously seen combat in Ukraine and sent that unit toward Donbas.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark and Kateryna Stepanenko

April 15, 4:30pm ET

Russian forces continued small-scale, tactical attacks on the Izyum and Severodonetsk axes; additional reinforcements to date have not enabled any breakthroughs of Ukrainian defenses. Russian forces continue to deploy reinforcements to eastern Ukraine but show no indication of taking an operational pause. The Russian military appears to be carrying out an approach in eastern Ukraine similar to its failed efforts north of Kyiv in early March—continuing to funnel small groups of forces into unsuccessful attacks against Ukrainian defensive positions without taking the operational pause that is likely necessary to prepare for a more successful offensive campaign. Russian forces continue to grind down Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol, though ISW cannot currently assess how long these forces will hold out and their current supply status.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to grind down Ukrainian defenses in southwestern and eastern Mariupol, though ISW cannot confirm any major new territorial changes in the past 24 hours. Ukrainian defenders reported that the situation is “deteriorating” and Russian forces are deploying additional artillery and heavy weapons.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful daily attacks against Rubizhne, Popasna, and Marinka and heavy shelling along the line of contact in eastern Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks from Izyum toward both Slovyansk and Barvinkove.
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## Ukraine Invasion Update 23

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Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

April 15

### Key Takeaways April 8-14

- Ukraine and Russia are both unlikely to advance ceasefire negotiations until the ongoing Russian campaign in eastern Ukraine develops further. The Kremlin likely seeks to capture at minimum the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, while Kyiv seeks to further degrade the Russian military and potentially conduct major counteroffensives.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin may be purging elements of his intelligence service and blaming close allies for Russian intelligence and planning failures in the lead-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- The Kremlin is likely falsely blaming Ukrainian forces for planning or conducting provocations in areas where Russian forces intend to commit or have already committed atrocities.
- Independent actors are unlikely to be able to verify Ukraine’s April 11 claim that Russian forces used chemical weapons in Mariupol, but Russian forces retain the capability to use chemical weapons beyond this specific instance.
- The Kremlin is reframing the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a Western war against Russia in a likely effort to maintain Russian domestic acceptance of the war.
- Belarus and Russia are increasing economic ties—and likely Kremlin influence over Belarus—as sanctions cut off both states from international markets.

- Finland and Sweden are increasingly reconsidering their non-aligned status and may move to join NATO in the coming months.
- Western countries continued to search for alternatives to Russian energy while the Kremlin tried to downplay the effects of Western sanctions on its economy and energy sector.
- NATO countries continue to secure their eastern borders and provide military assistance (including several high-end capabilities) to Ukraine to counter Russian aggression.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

April 14, 7:15pm ET

The Russian missile cruiser *Moskva*, flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, sunk on April 14 after a likely Ukrainian anti-ship missile strike on April 13. Ukrainian forces claimed to strike the *Moskva* with two Neptune anti-ship cruise missiles on April 13.<sup>[1]</sup> The Kremlin denied this claim and stated the *Moskva* suffered damage from an accidental fire and ammunition explosion.<sup>[2]</sup> Initial Ukrainian claims to have sunk the warship on April 13 were likely false, but the Russian Ministry of Defense confirmed the *Moskva* sank in a storm while being towed to Crimea after the crew evacuated.<sup>[3]</sup> ISW cannot independently confirm that a Ukrainian strike sunk the *Moskva*, though Ukrainian forces likely have the capability to have done so.

**The loss of the *Moskva*—regardless if from a Ukrainian strike or an accident—is a major propaganda victory for Ukraine.** The sinking of the *Moskva*, which was involved in the infamous “Snake Island” incident in the early days of the Russian invasion, is a boon to Ukrainian morale as a symbol of Ukrainian capabilities to strike back at the Russian navy. The Kremlin will conversely struggle to explain away the loss of one of the most important vessels in the Russian fleet. The Kremlin’s current story of losing the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet due to an accidental fire and ammunition explosion will, at minimum, likely hurt Russian morale and cannot be hidden from the Russian domestic audience. Both explanations for the sinking of the *Moskva* indicate possible Russian deficiencies—either poor air defenses or incredibly lax safety procedures and damage control on the Black Sea Fleet’s flagship.

**The loss of the *Moskva* will reduce Russia’s ability to conduct cruise missile strikes but is unlikely to deal a decisive blow to Russian operations on the whole.** The *Moskva*’s main role was likely conducting precision strikes with Kalibr cruise missiles on targets in Ukrainian rear areas, including logistics centers and airfields. These Russian strikes have been effective but limited in number compared to airstrikes and ground-launched cruise missiles throughout the invasion, and the loss of the *Moskva* is unlikely to be a decisive blow. Ukraine’s possibly demonstrated ability to target Russian warships in the Black Sea may change Russian operating patterns, however, forcing them to either deploy additional air and point-defense assets to the Black Sea battlegroup or withdraw vessels from positions near the Ukrainian coast.

### Key Takeaways

- The flagship of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet sunk on April 14 following a likely Ukrainian cruise missile strike on April 13. The loss of the *Moskva* is a significant propaganda victory for Ukraine but will likely have only limited effects on Russian operations.
- Ukrainian officials admitted Russian forces captured “some” personnel from Ukraine’s 36th Marine Brigade in Mariupol despite initial denials, though Ukrainian defenders predominantly continued to hold out against Russian assaults.
- Russian forces may have committed damaged units withdrawn from northeastern Ukraine to combat operations in eastern Ukraine for the first time on April 14. Continued daily Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine are failing to take any territory.
- Ukrainian partisans have likely been active in the Melitopol region since at least mid-March.
- Russian forces continued to redeploy from Belarus to Russia for further deployment to eastern Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 13, 4:30pm ET

Russian claims of a mass Ukrainian surrender in Mariupol are likely false, but Russian forces forced Ukrainian troops to abandon the Ilyich metal plant in northern Mariupol on April 13, further constricting the two remaining pockets of Ukrainian defenders. Russian forces will likely capture Mariupol in the coming week. Russian forces continued to conduct small-scale limited offensive operations on both the Izyum and Severodonetsk axes and has not yet begun a broader offensive campaign.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to take ground in Mariupol, but Russian claims of a mass Ukrainian surrender are likely false.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful local attacks in eastern Ukraine amid continuing preparations for a likely wider offensive.
- Russian forces continued to regroup in Kharkiv Oblast for offensive operations and conducted only minor attacks south of Izyum.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and George Barros

April 12, 5:30pm ET

Russia continued offensive operations in eastern Ukraine on a limited basis as it worked to reconstitute forces withdrawn from the Battle of Kyiv and to establish necessary logistical bases for increased offensive operations in the Donbas area. Russian forces withdrawn from the Kyiv region have not yet been reintroduced into Ukraine to fight. The Russian military has continued to conduct small-scale limited offensive operations on the Izyum and Severodonetsk axes and has not yet gone over to a better-resourced or broader offensive campaign. The Battle of Mariupol continues even as Ukrainian officials accuse Russia of using chemical weapons on Mariupol's defenders.

### Key Takeaways

- The Russian military continues offensive operations in Donbas and is not in a pure reconstitution phase. It has not undertaken an across-the-board operational pause while waiting for reinforcements to arrive. In part, as a result, it has made limited gains while continuing to sustain significant losses.
- Mariupol has not yet fallen.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 11

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Karolina Hird, and George Barros

April 11, 8:30pm ET

Special Edition: Army General Aleksandr Vladimirovich Dvornikov

US intelligence reported over the weekend of April 9-10 that Russian Army General Aleksandr Vladimirovich Dvornikov, commander of the Southern Military District, is now in overall command of Russian operations in Ukraine. This news is unsurprising; Dvornikov is the most senior of the three Russian military district commanders involved in the invasion, and the Russian military is concentrating its efforts almost exclusively in the area of Ukraine that Dvornikov had already been commanding. Had Putin selected another officer to command the entire war effort, he would likely have had to relieve Dvornikov for these reasons. There is no reason to suppose, therefore, that Dvornikov was specifically selected to take control of the war effort for any particular skills or experience he might have. Nor is there reason to think that the conduct of the Russian war effort will change materially more than it was already changing from the abandonment of the drive on Kyiv and the focus on the east. This update, which we are publishing in addition to our regular military operations assessments, explains Dvornikov's career history and experience in Syria, the challenges he faces, and what his appointment means for the Russian campaign in Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian Commander of the Southern Military District Army General Alexander Dvornikov is the natural choice to take overall command of Russian operations in Ukraine. There is no reason to suppose Dvornikov was selected for any particular skills or experience, nor is there reason to think the conduct of the Russian war effort will materially change more than it was already changing due to the Russian abandonment of northeastern Ukraine and focus on the east.
- Russian forces may have used chemical weapons against Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol, though ISW cannot independently verify Ukrainian claims at this time.
- Russian forces failed to make significant advances in continued assaults on Severodonetsk, Popasna, and Rubizhne in eastern Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued to amass troops in Kharkiv Oblast to reinforce offensive operations on the Izyum axis and conducted several minor attacks.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 10

### Mason Clark, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 10, 5:00 pm ET

Russian forces made territorial gains in Mariupol in the past 24 hours and continued to reinforce operations along the Izyum-Sloviansk axis but did not make other territorial gains. Russian forces bisected Mariupol from the city center to the coast on April 10, isolating the remaining Ukrainian defenders in two main locations: the main port of Mariupol in the southwest and the Azovstal steel plant in the east. Russian forces, including a convoy of hundreds of vehicles captured in Maxar Technologies imagery on April 8, continue to reinforce Russia's offensive in Izyum to link up with Russian positions in Luhansk Oblast.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces bisected Mariupol from the city center to the coast on April 10, isolating the remaining Ukrainian defenders in the southwestern port and eastern Azovstal Steel Plant.
- Russian forces again made little to no progress in frontal assaults in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts but continue to cohere further reinforcements.
- Maxar Technologies satellite imagery captured hundreds of Russian vehicles in Kharkiv Oblast redeploying to support Russian operations near Izyum.
- Ukrainian counterattacks may threaten Kherson city in the coming days or weeks.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 9

### [Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 9, 4:30 pm ET

The Russian military is attempting to generate sufficient combat power to seize and hold the portions of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts that it does not currently control after it completes the seizure of Mariupol. There are good reasons to question the Russian armed forces' ability to do so and their ability to use regenerated combat power effectively despite a reported simplification of the Russian command structure. This update, which we offer on a day without significant military operations on which to report, attempts to explain and unpack some of the complexities involved in making these assessments.

*We discuss in this issue some instances in which American and other officials have presented information in ways that may inadvertently exaggerate Russian combat capability. We do not in any way mean to suggest that such exaggeration is intentional. Presenting an accurate picture of a military's combat power is inherently difficult. Doing so from classified assessments in an unclassified environment is especially so. We respect the efforts and integrity of US and allied officials trying to help the general public understand this conflict and offer the comments below in hopes of helping them in that task.*

#### Key Takeaways

- Russia is unlikely to be able to mass combat power for the fight in eastern Ukraine proportionate to the number of troops and battalion tactical groups it sends there.
- The Russian military continues to suffer from devastating morale, recruitment, and retention problems that seriously undermine its ability to fight effectively.
- The outcome of forthcoming Russian operations in eastern Ukraine remains very much in question.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark and Kateryna Stepanenko

April 8, 5:00pm ET

Ukrainian forces retain control of defensive positions in eastern and southwestern Mariupol, despite Russian claims to have captured most of the city. ISW was able to confirm the specific locations of ongoing Russian assaults on April 8 for the first time in several days. Russian forces continue to attempt to regroup and redeploy units withdrawn from northeastern Ukraine to support an offensive in eastern Ukraine, but these units are unlikely to enable a Russian breakthrough and face poor morale. Russian forces along the Izyum-Sloviansk axis did not make any territorial gains in the last 24 hours. Ukrainian counterattacks toward Kherson continue to threaten Russian positions around the city.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued to hold out against Russian assaults in areas of southwestern and eastern Mariupol, notably in the port and the Azovstal Metallurgy plant, respectively.
- Ukrainian forces continued to repel daily Russian assaults in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts.
- A Russian Tochka-U missile struck a civilian evacuation point at the Kramatorsk rail station in eastern Ukraine, killing at least 50 and wounding around a hundred evacuees.
- Russian forces continued attacks south of Izyum toward Sloviansk and Barvinkove but did not take any new territory.
- Ukrainian counterattacks have likely taken further territory west of Kherson, threatening Russian control of the city.

## Ukraine Invasion Update 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

April 8

The Ukraine Invasion Update is a weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from April 2-7.

#### Key Takeaways April 2-7

- Russian atrocities in Ukraine, Kremlin efforts to falsely blame Ukraine for these atrocities, and continuing Ukrainian battlefield successes have reduced the willingness of the Ukrainian government and society to reach a peace agreement less than total Russian defeat.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky specified for the first time that Ukraine's desired "security guarantees" in lieu of NATO membership are written commitments from several states to provide Ukraine with immediate military aid and enact sanctions on Russia in the event of further Russian aggression.
- The Kremlin is blaming the United States for Russian atrocities against civilians in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha, where Russian troops killed around 400 Ukrainian civilians. Western states imposed additional sanctions and expelled Russian diplomats in response to the Russian atrocities.
- The Kremlin is setting conditions to blame Ukraine for Russian atrocities in occupied areas and may be intentionally doing so in areas where the Kremlin knows Russian forces have already killed civilians to disguise Russian culpability.
- Russian forces are accelerating operations to install governance structures in occupied Ukraine and are detaining or killing Ukrainian mayors.
- Kremlin media increasingly seeks to justify Russian atrocities and the intentional targeting of Ukrainian civilians to a Russian domestic audience.
- The Kremlin is attempting to frame the global economic consequences of its invasion of Ukraine as a result of Western sanctions to call for their removal.
- Newly announced weapons shipments from the United Kingdom and the United States will supplement Ukrainian supplies and expand Ukrainian capabilities to target Russian forces massed in southern Ukraine and in the Black Sea.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 7, 5:15 pm ET

Russian proxy forces claimed to have captured central Mariupol on April 7, but Ukrainian forces retain positions in the southwest of the city. ISW cannot independently confirm this proxy claim, but we have not observed confirmed reports of fighting in central Mariupol since April 2. [1] Russian forces will likely complete the capture of Mariupol in the coming days.

**Russian forces are cohering combat power for an intended major offensive in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the coming days.** Ukrainian civil and military officials continued to warn local residents to evacuate prior to a likely Russian offensive. Russian forces will likely attempt to regroup and redeploy units withdrawn from northeastern Ukraine to support an offensive, but these units are unlikely to enable a Russian breakthrough. Russian forces along the Izyum-Sloviansk axis did not make any territorial gains in the last 24 hours. Russian forces are unlikely to successfully capture Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts if Russian forces in Izyum are unable to encircle Ukrainian forces on the line of contact in eastern Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces claim to have successfully captured central Mariupol, but Ukrainian forces retain control of the port southwest of the city. Russian forces will likely complete the capture of Mariupol in the coming days.

- Russian forces are setting conditions for a major offensive in eastern Ukraine in the coming days, but damaged units redeployed from northeastern Ukraine are unlikely to enable a successful Russian breakthrough.
- Ukrainian forces repelled continuing Russian attacks from Izyum southeast toward Slovyansk and Barvinkove.
- Russian and Belarusian forces are conducting “demonstrative actions” to fix Ukrainian forces around Kyiv in place. However, these units are highly unlikely to launch new offensive operations, and Ukrainian units around Kyiv can likely safely redeploy to eastern Ukraine.
- Western sanctions are likely successfully disrupting Russia’s military-industrial base.

## [Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 6](#)

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

April 6, 5:00 pm ET

**Russian forces continued to redeploy forces to the Izyum-Slovyansk axis and eastern Ukraine in the past 24 hours and did not secure any major advances.** Russian forces completed their withdrawal from Sumy Oblast, and Russian forces previously withdrawn from northeastern Ukraine continued to redeploy to Belgorod, Russia, for further deployment to Izyum or Donbas. The Ukrainian military reported that Russia plans to deploy elements from the Kyiv axis to Izyum, but these units will not likely regain combat effectiveness for some time.

**Russian forces may be preparing for a larger offensive in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts in the coming days, but are unlikely to generate the combat power necessary to break through Ukrainian defenses in continuing frontal assaults.** Ukrainian officials and pro-Russian Telegram channels both reported additional Russian equipment arriving in Donbas from an unspecified location in preparation for a renewed offensive. Russian forces continued assaults in Mariupol, and we cannot confirm concrete control of terrain changes in the city. Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Izyum-Slovyansk axis but did not make any major territorial gains.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces with heavy air and artillery support continued assaults on Ukrainian positions in Mariupol in the past 24 hours.
- Russian and proxy forces in eastern Ukraine are likely attempting to consolidate forces and material for an offensive in the coming days.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations from Izyum towards Slovyansk but did not make any major territorial gains.
- Ukrainian forces conducted successful counterattacks towards Kherson from both the north and west.
- Russian forces completely vacated Sumy Oblast.
- Russian General Officers are reportedly instructing commanders to severely restrict internet access among Russian personnel in an attempt to combat low morale.
- The US and NATO should take a strong stance on any Russian threat to use its military forces in Transnistria, the illegally Russian-occupied strip of Moldova bordering Ukraine.

## [Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 5](#)

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Karolina Hird

April 5, 4:30 pm ET

**Russian forces continued to reposition to continue their invasion in eastern and southern Ukraine, having abandoned the attack on Kyiv. They have largely completed their withdrawal from the Kyiv area and are reportedly redeploying some of the withdrawn combat forces from Belarus to Russia.** Ukrainian forces are moving to regain control over segments of the state border in Chernihiv, having already done so in Kyiv and Zhytomyr Oblasts. Russian troops are pulling back toward Russia along the Sumy axis as well, but it is not yet clear if they intend to retreat all the way back to the border or will try to hold some forward positions on the Sumy axis.

**Russia has not yet committed forces withdrawn from the Battle of Kyiv back into the fighting in eastern Ukraine. Russian reinforcements continuing the drive southeast from Izyum toward Slovyansk are from elements of 1st Guards Tank Army units that had been in the Kharkiv-Sumy**

**area.** Russian units that retreated from Kyiv will not likely regain combat effectiveness for some time, and it is not clear that the Russians intend to return them to the fight soon. That said, an unconfirmed Ukrainian military intelligence report suggests that Moscow could soon send the 64th Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 35th Combined Arms Army, a unit that reportedly committed war crimes in Bucha, into the fight in eastern Ukraine in the hopes that guilty members of that brigade and witnesses of its war crimes are killed in combat with Ukrainian forces.<sup>[1]</sup>

**Belgorod continues to emerge as the primary concentration area for Russian forces regrouping and refitting after their retreat from Kyiv and in preparation for onward movement to their home stations or to join the fighting in the east.** Elements of the Central Military District pulling back from Chernihiv Oblast are reportedly on their way to Belgorod.<sup>[2]</sup> Their final destination is not yet known.

**The Battle of Mariupol continues, with Russian forces continuing to pound the city using artillery and airpower.** The constrained information environment in Mariupol prevents us from assessing concrete changes in control of terrain, but Ukrainian forces appear to be sustaining organized resistance in parts of the city.

**Russian offensive operations southeast from Izyum toward Slovyansk continued on a small scale and made limited progress.** Russia has not yet attempted to mass large concentrations of forces on this axis but continues instead to send individual battalion tactical groups to advance on their own.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The withdrawal of Russian forces from around Kyiv is nearing completion.
- Russia has not yet introduced forces withdrawn from western Ukraine into the fight in the east.
- Ukrainian forces continued to put up organized resistance in parts of Mariupol.
- Russian forces conducted limited offensive operations on the Izyum-Slovyansk axis.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 4**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird

April 4, 5:30 pm ET

**Russian forces continue to make little to no progress in frontal assaults to capture Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, their current main effort of the war.** Russian units in Donbas face growing morale and supply issues. Additionally, the Ukrainian defenders of Mariupol have outperformed ISW's previous estimates and continue to hold the city. Russian efforts to generate replacements from reservists and feed damaged units from northeastern Ukraine into frontal assaults in eastern Ukraine are unlikely to increase their chances of success.

**However, Russian forces advancing from the Kharkiv axis are setting conditions to resume offensive operations through the city of Slovyansk to link up with other Russian forces in Donbas and encircle Ukrainian defenders.** Russian forces captured Izyum (southeast of Kharkiv) on April 1 and have conducted active preparations to resume offensive operations for the past three days—stockpiling supplies, refitting damaged units, repairing the damaged bridge in Izyum, and conducting reconnaissance in force missions toward the southeast. Russian forces will likely begin offensive operations towards Slovyansk, 50km southeast of Izyum, in the coming days.

**Efforts by Russian forces advancing from Izyum to capture Slovyansk will likely prove to be the next pivotal battle of the war in Ukraine.** Russian forces likely intend to cut off Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine and will need to take Slovyansk as their minimum step to do so. If Russian forces take Slovyansk, they will then have the option to advance directly east to link up with Russian forces fighting in Rubizhne—a shorter drive that will not isolate many Ukrainian forces—or advance toward Horlivka and Donetsk to attempt a wider encirclement of Ukrainian forces. Both options could enable at least limited Russian breakthroughs in Luhansk Oblast. **If Russian forces are unable to take Slovyansk at all, Russian frontal assaults in Donbas are unlikely to independently breakthrough Ukrainian defenses and Russia's campaign to capture the entirety of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts will likely fail.**

Degraded Russian forces in northeastern Ukraine continued to withdraw to Russia and are unlikely to be effective elsewhere, despite ongoing Russian efforts to redeploy them to eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian forces are conducting operations to clear Russians left behind in the withdrawal, and Russian forces are unlikely to hold any cohesive defensive positions. The Ukrainian military reported that elements of Russian VDV (Airborne) units withdrawn from northern Kyiv flew to Belgorod, Russia, on April 4. These units are understrength, missing equipment, and likely highly demoralized. Russian servicemen from the Kyiv axis ordered to reenter combat operations may desert or refuse orders, which has occurred in several Russian units throughout the war—including several units that had not yet entered combat.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces in Izyum are setting conditions to begin offensive operations southeast toward Slovyansk in the coming days to link up with other Russian forces in Donbas and encircle Ukrainian defenders.
- Russian forces in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts continue to make little to no progress and face mounting casualties and declining morale. Replacements and reinforcements from northeastern Ukraine are highly unlikely to meaningfully change the balance of forces.
- Efforts by Russian forces advancing from Izyum to capture Slovyansk and threaten Ukrainian forces in Donbas with encirclement will likely prove to be the next pivotal battle of the war in Ukraine. If Russian forces are unable to take Slovyansk, Russia's campaign to capture the entirety of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts will likely fail.
- The defenders of Mariupol have outperformed ISW's previous estimates, and Russian forces are likely taking heavy casualties in ongoing efforts to capture the city.
- Ukrainian forces likely conducted successful counterattacks in Kherson Oblast in the last 24 hours.
- Russian forces have almost completely withdrawn from Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts and will likely completely vacate these regions in the coming days.
- Russian forces withdrawn from the Kyiv axis are highly unlikely to be effectively deployed elsewhere in Ukraine and are likely a spent force.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 3

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Karolina Hird

April 3, 3:30 pm ET

Ukraine has won the Battle of Kyiv. Russian forces are completing their withdrawal, but not in good order. Ukrainian forces are continuing to clear Kyiv Oblast of isolated Russian troops left behind in the retreat, which some Ukrainian officials describe as “lost orcs.” Russian forces had attempted to conduct an orderly retreat from their positions around Kyiv with designated covering forces supported by artillery and mines to allow the main body to withdraw. The main body of Russian troops has withdrawn from the west bank of the Dnipro and is completing its withdrawal from the east bank, but the retrograde has been sufficiently disorderly that some Russian troops were left behind.

The war is far from over and could still turn Russia's way if the Russian military can launch a successful operation in eastern Ukraine. The current line of Russian occupation in southern and eastern Ukraine is still a significant gain in Russian-controlled territory since the start of the war. If a ceasefire or peace agreement freezes a line like the current front-line trace, Russia will be able to exert much greater pressure on Ukraine than it did before the invasion and may over time reassemble a more effective invasion force. Ukraine's victory in the Battle of Kyiv is thus significant but not decisive.

The disorder of the Russian withdrawal suggests that at least some of the units now reconcentrating in Belarus and western Russia will remain combat ineffective for a protracted period. Russian troops attempting to refit after pulling back from around Kyiv will likely have to reconsolidate into their units, identify which soldiers are still present, sort out their equipment and assess its combat readiness, and generally reconstitute before they can even begin to receive replacements and new equipment and prepare for further combat operations.

**Russian forces are likely abandoning the east bank of the Dnipro fully as well, withdrawing from around Chernihiv to the north and from Brovary to the east.** Russian troops will likely seek to hold a salient around Konotop and Sumy long enough to allow their forces to complete their retrograde from near Kyiv but will then likely withdraw back to Russia from almost all their positions west of Kharkiv.

**Moscow is attempting to concentrate reserves and some units pulled from the fight around Sumy to reinforce its offensive operations in the east but is encountering serious challenges in that effort.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on April 3 that Russian soldiers are resisting and in some cases refusing orders to enter or re-enter the war effort. The General Staff asserted that the two battalion tactical groups (BTGs) that moved from South Ossetia toward Donbas less than a week ago refused to fight and that plans to move them back to South Ossetia are in train.<sup>[1]</sup> The General Staff claimed that about 25 soldiers of the Russian 31st Separate Airborne Brigade refused orders to re-enter combat citing excessive losses.<sup>[2]</sup> The General Staff also asserted that commanders at various echelons in the Russian 3rd Motorized Rifle Division have refused to participate in combat operations.<sup>[3]</sup> We have no independent verification of these reports, but they are credible in light of the losses Russian forces have suffered and of independent reports of Russian soldiers killing commanders and commanders committing suicide from earlier in the conflict.

**Russian efforts to advance its offensive operations in eastern Ukraine made limited progress in the past 24 hours.** Fighting continues in Mariupol and on the Izyum-Severodonetsk axis.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukraine has won the Battle of Kyiv, and Russian forces are completing their withdrawals from both the east and the west banks of the Dnipro in disorder.
- Russian forces retreating from around Kyiv will likely need considerable time before they can return to combat.
- Incidents of refusals of orders to engage in combat operations among Russian units continue and may lead to the redeployment of two BTGs that had arrived near Donbas within the last few days to their home stations in South Ossetia.
- The continued existence of an independent Ukrainian state with its capital in Kyiv is no longer in question at this time, although much fighting remains and the war could still turn Russia's way.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird

April 2, 5:00 pm ET

**Continuing Russian operations along their new main effort in eastern Ukraine made little progress on April 2, and Russian forces likely require some time to redeploy and integrate reinforcements from other axes.** Ukrainian forces repelled likely large-scale Russian assaults in Donbas on April 2 and inflicted heavy casualties. Russian forces continued to capture territory in central Mariupol and will likely capture the city in the coming days. Russian units around Kyiv and in northeastern Ukraine continued to successfully withdraw into Belarus and Russia, and heavy mining in previously Russian-occupied areas is forcing Ukrainian forces to conduct slow clearing operations.

However, the Russian units withdrawn from northeastern Ukraine for redeployment to eastern Ukraine are heavily damaged. Russian forces likely require an extensive operational pause to refit existing units in Donbas, refit and redeploy reinforcements from other axes, and integrate these forces—pulled from several military districts that have not yet operated on a single axis—into a cohesive fighting force. We have observed no indicators of Russian plans to carry out such a pause, and Russian forces will likely fail to break through Ukrainian defenses if they continue to steadily funnel already damaged units into fighting in eastern Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continued to capture territory in central Mariupol on April 2 and will likely capture the city within days.

- Ukrainian forces repelled several possibly large-scale Russian assaults in Donbas, claiming to destroy almost 70 Russian vehicles.
- Russian forces will likely require a lengthy operational pause to integrate reinforcements into existing force structures in eastern Ukraine and enable successful operations but appear unlikely to do so and will continue to bleed their forces in ineffective daily attacks.
- Russian forces in Izyum conducted an operational pause after successfully capturing the city on April 1 and will likely resume offensive operations to link up with Russian forces in Donbas in the coming days.
- Russia continued to withdraw forces from the Kyiv axis into Belarus and Russia. Ukrainian forces primarily conducted operations to sweep and clear previously Russian-occupied territory.
- Ukrainian forces likely repelled limited Russian attacks in Kherson Oblast.
- The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces have rendered two-thirds of the 75 Russian Battalion Tactical Groups it assesses have fought in Ukraine either temporarily or permanently combat ineffective.

## **Ukraine Invasion Update 21**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

April 2

The Ukraine Invasion Update is a semi-weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from March 30-April 1. All of the ISW Russia's team's coverage of the war in Ukraine—including daily military assessments and maps, past Conflict Updates, and several supplemental assessments—are available on our [Ukraine Crisis Coverage](#) landing page.

### **Key Takeaways March 30-April 1**

- Ongoing peace talks will likely protract, and the Kremlin is unlikely to withdraw its main demands in the near future.
- Russia and Ukraine may have reached initial agreements on Ukrainian “neutrality” in ongoing negotiations, but remain stalled on the Kremlin’s refusal to discuss Crimea and the Donbas.
- The Kremlin set additional conditions on March 30-April 1 for a chemical or biochemical false-flag attack in eastern Ukraine or Russia.
- Ongoing European efforts to find alternatives to Russian energy likely successfully undercut a Kremlin attempt to buttress the Russian economy by coercing Europe into buying Russian gas in rubles.
- Sustained Western military aid to Ukraine will help enable further Ukrainian counterattacks in the coming weeks.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 1**

**Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird**

April 1, 7:00 pm ET

ISW assesses that the Kremlin has revised its campaign plan in Ukraine after the failure of its initial campaign to capture Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities and its subsequent failure to adjust its operations in late March. ISW previously assessed that the initial Russian campaign of the war—airborne and mechanized operations to seize Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and other major Ukrainian cities to force a change of government in Ukraine—had failed as of March 19.<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian military continued to feed small collections of reinforcements into operations around Kyiv and across northeastern and southern Ukraine in an effort to keep its initial campaign plan alive throughout late March. We assess that the Russian military has now halted these failed efforts and is beginning a new

phase of its campaign in Ukraine with new objectives. We are updating the structure of our campaign assessments to reflect the new structure and prioritization of Russian operations.

**Russia's main effort is now focused on eastern Ukraine, with two subordinate main efforts: capturing the port city of Mariupol and capturing the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts.** The Kremlin claims the entirety of these oblasts as the territory of its proxies in eastern Ukraine, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR).<sup>[2]</sup> The Kremlin is increasingly redeploying troops from other axes of advance and channeling its remaining reinforcements from Russia into eastern Ukraine. Russian forces are unlikely to conduct active operations on other fronts in the coming weeks.

**The Kremlin may intend to capture Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts before seeking to negotiate a Kremlin-favorable ceasefire and claim that Russia has achieved its war aims.** The Kremlin's initial false justification for its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine was to protect the DNR and LNR from Ukraine and enable them to seize their "claimed" territory. The Kremlin is attempting to gloss over the failure of Russia's initial campaign for a domestic Russian audience. The Kremlin has in fact been forced to alter its operations after the failure of its initial campaign. **Kremlin claims that Russian forces solely attacked northeastern Ukraine to degrade Ukrainian forces before achieving the "main goal" of capturing Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts – such as statements made by the Russian General Staff on March 25 – are false.**<sup>[3]</sup>

**Russian forces have three supporting efforts: Kharkiv and Izyum; Kyiv and northeastern Ukraine; and the southern axis, including Kherson.**

- **Russian forces on the Kharkiv axis have abandoned efforts to take the city. Their new objectives are likely to 1) pin Ukrainian mechanized forces in place, and 2) drive southeast to link up with Russian forces in Luhansk Oblast.** Russian forces captured Izyum (southeast of Kharkiv) on April 1 after attempting to do so since at least March 7. [4] Russian forces, including elements redeployed from the Sumy axis in the past week, will likely continue offensive operations in the coming days in an effort to cut off Ukrainian forces on the line of contact in Donbas.
- **Russian forces around Kyiv and in northeastern Ukraine seek to conduct a retrograde action—the orderly withdrawal of combat forces—for refit and further redeployment to other axes of advance.** Russian forces remaining on the forward trace of Russian lines are a covering force intended to screen the retrograde of most of the combat power previously deployed around Kyiv. Ukrainian forces retook substantial territory both northwest and east of Kyiv in the past 24 hours. Ukrainian forces likely advanced faster than Russian forces anticipated, but Russian forces successfully withdrew much of the damaged combat power remaining around Kyiv into Belarus.
- **Russian forces on the southern axis—centered on Kherson—are unlikely to conduct offensive operations in the near future and will aim to defend Russian-occupied territory around Kherson against Ukrainian counterattacks.** Russian forces will additionally likely prioritize securing southern Ukraine against increasingly frequent Ukrainian partisan actions. Russian forces are unlikely to resume offensive operations west toward Mykolaiv or north toward Zaporizhzhia and Kryvyi Rih in the near future.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- We now assess that Russia has revised its campaign plan in Ukraine after the failure of operations to seize Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities throughout March.
- The Kremlin's claims that Russia's main objective has been eastern Ukraine throughout the war are false and intended to obfuscate the failure of Russia's initial campaign.
- Russia's main effort is now concentrated on eastern Ukraine. Russian forces seek to capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.
- Russian forces will likely take Mariupol in the coming days but continue to suffer heavy casualties.
- Russian forces seek to fix in place the Ukrainian forces around Kharkiv.
- Russian forces captured Izyum after three weeks of fighting on April 1 and will attempt to advance southeast to link up with Russian forces in Luhansk Oblast in the coming days.
- Ukrainian forces recaptured large swathes of terrain both northwest and east of Kyiv in the past 24 hours, but Russia successfully withdrew elements of its damaged forces into Belarus.
- The Kremlin will continue to funnel reinforcements (including both low-quality individual replacements from Russia and damaged units redeployed from northeastern Ukraine) into operations in eastern Ukraine, but these degraded forces are unlikely to enable Russia to conduct successful large-scale offensive operations.

## The Risks of a Russian Ceasefire Offer

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Nataliya Bugayova

Ukraine may soon face a new threat in this war—Russia's ceasefire offer. It seems odd to say that a ceasefire is a threat. Once war begins, the default position in the West is to seize the earliest opportunity to "stop the fighting." But while some ceasefires lead to peace, others lead to more war—as the Russians have repeatedly shown. The frontlines frozen in a ceasefire set the conditions for the negotiations and reconstruction that follow. They also set conditions for future conflict. Those seeking enduring peace in Ukraine must resist the temptation to accept a Russian ceasefire offer that sets conditions for renewed conflict on Russia's terms or gives Russia leverage on Ukraine with which to force concessions and surrenders.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 31

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird

March 31, 6:00 pm ET

**Ukrainian forces conducted several local counterattacks around Kyiv, in northeastern Ukraine, and toward Kherson on March 31, successfully pressuring Russian forces and seeking to disrupt ongoing Russian troop rotations.** Ukrainian forces northwest of Kyiv pushed Russian forces north of the E-40 highway and will likely assault Russian-held Bucha and Hostomel in the coming days. Ukrainian forces exploited limited Russian withdrawals east of Brovary to retake territory across Kyiv and Chernihiv Oblasts. Ukrainian forces likely conducted counterattacks toward Sumy in the past 24 hours as well, though ISW cannot independently confirm these reports. Finally, Ukrainian forces conducted limited counterattacks in northern Kherson Oblast. Russian forces only conducted offensive operations in Donbas and against Mariupol in the last 24 hours and did not make any major advances.

**Russian efforts to redeploy damaged units from the Kyiv and Sumy axes to eastern Ukraine are unlikely to enable Russian forces to conduct major gains.** Russia continued to withdraw elements of the 35th and 36th Combined Arms Armies and 76 Air Assault Division from their positions northwest of Kyiv into Belarus for refit and likely further redeployment to eastern Ukraine. However, these units are likely heavily damaged and demoralized. Feeding damaged Eastern Military District units directly into operations in eastern Ukraine—predominantly conducted by the Southern Military District—will likely prove ineffective and additionally introduce further command-and-control challenges for the Russian military. Russian forces will likely attempt to retain their current front lines around Kyiv and in northeastern Ukraine and will continue to dig in on these fronts; ISW has not seen any indicators of Russian forces fully relinquishing captured territory. However, Ukrainian counterattacks are likely disrupting Russian efforts to redeploy and refit their forces and will continue in the coming days.

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces successfully conducted local counterattacks around Kyiv, towards Sumy, and in Kherson Oblast and will likely take further territory—particularly northwest and east of Kyiv—in the coming days.
- Russia is withdrawing elements of its damaged forces around Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy for redeployment to eastern Ukraine, but these units are unlikely to provide a decisive shift in Russian combat power.
- Ukrainian forces continued to repel Russian assaults throughout Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, and Russian forces failed to take territory in the past 24 hours.
- Russian forces continue to steadily advance in Mariupol.
- Russia's preplanned spring draft will begin on April 1 and does not appear abnormal from Russia's typical conscription cycle. Newly drafted conscripts will not provide Russia with additional combat power for many months.
- The Kremlin is likely accelerating efforts to establish quasi-state entities to govern occupied Ukrainian territory.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 30, 5:30 pm ET

Russia is withdrawing some elements of its forces around Kyiv into Belarus for likely redeployment to other axes of advance and did not conduct any offensive operations around the city in the past 24 hours, but Russian forces will likely continue to hold their forwardmost positions and shell Ukrainian forces and residential areas. Ukrainian forces repelled several Russian attacks in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the past 24 hours and Russian forces likely continued to take territory in Mariupol. Russian forces held their positions and did not conduct offensive operations throughout the rest of the country. Russian forces will likely capture Mariupol in the coming days but likely suffered high casualties taking the city, and Russian force generation efforts and the redeployment of damaged units from the Kyiv axis are increasingly unlikely to enable Russian forces to make rapid gains in the Donbas region.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces around Kyiv held their forward positions and continued to defend against limited Ukrainian counterattacks. Russian forces are unlikely to give up their secured territory around the city and are continuing to dig in.
- ISW can confirm Russia is withdrawing some units around Kyiv for likely redeployment to other axes of advance, but *cannot* confirm any changes in Russian force posture around Chernihiv as of this time.
- Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine in the past 24 hours.
- Elements of the 20th Combined Arms Army and 1st Guards Tank Army are redeploying to support Russian operations on Izyum, but are unlikely to take the city in the near future.
- Ukrainian forces repelled continuing Russian assaults in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts. Russian forces continued to take territory in Mariupol but are likely suffering high casualties.

## Ukraine Invasion Update 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

March 30

The Ukraine Invasion Update is a semi-weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from March 25-29. All of the ISW Russia's team's coverage of the war in Ukraine – including daily military assessments and maps, past Conflict Updates, and several supplemental assessments – are available on our [Ukraine Crisis Coverage](#) landing page.

### Key Takeaways March 25-29

- The Kremlin is falsely presenting its partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Kyiv and Chernihiv as a major Russian concession in service of peace talks with Ukraine. In reality, Russian forces are withdrawing to recuperate after suffering severe losses in their failed operations to seize those cities.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko continues to withstand Russian pressure to enter the war in Ukraine on Russia's behalf.

- The Kremlin is intensifying its internal censorship and crackdown on entities in Russia that do not cover the war in the Kremlin's preferred terms.
- The Kremlin denied reports of increased conscription on March 26 but is likely beginning a broader mobilization that will coincide with Russia's annual spring conscription on April 1. These new conscription drives are unlikely to generate effective Russian combat power for many months, at the earliest.
- The Kremlin maintained its defamatory narratives about claimed US involvement in Ukrainian laboratories and Russian nuclear capabilities to discredit and intimidate the West.
- The Kremlin continued to downplay the effects of Western sanctions on the Russian economy and threatened the West with counter-sanctions leveraging Russian energy exports.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 29, 5:00 ET

The Russians have not yet abandoned their attacks on Kyiv, claims by Russian Defense Ministry officials notwithstanding. Russian forces continued fighting to hold their forwardmost positions on the eastern and western Kyiv outskirts even as badly damaged units withdrew to Russia from elsewhere on the Kyiv and Chernihiv axes. The Russian high command has likely concluded that it cannot seize Kyiv and may not be able to move artillery closer to the center of the city. It may have decided to stop its previous practices of forcing units that have already taken devastating losses to continue hopeless offensive operations and of feeding individual battalion tactical groups into the battle as they become available rather than concentrating them to achieve decisive effects. Russian officials are likely casting these decisions driven by military realities as overtures demonstrating Russia's willingness to engage in serious ceasefire or peace negotiations, possibly to conceal the fact that they have accepted the failure of their efforts on the Kyiv axis.

**Russia continues to reinforce its efforts in Ukraine's northeast likely attempting to link its positions southeast of Kharkiv and Izyum with its forces in Luhansk Oblast.** The Russians have reportedly redirected forces from the Chernihiv-Kharkiv axis to the Izyum-Sloviansk axis, most likely reassigning reinforcements rather than redeploying units already committed to fighting. Russian forces in the Izyum-Sloviansk area continue fighting to hold and expand their penetration to the southeast.

**The Russian advance in Mariupol continues to gain ground, and Russian forces have likely bisected or even trisected the city.** Pockets of Ukrainian defenders continue to hold out in Mariupol, likely in several areas, but the Russians will likely complete the conquest of the city within days. Russian forces have likely taken significant casualties in the tough urban fighting in Mariupol, making it difficult to evaluate how much combat power the Russians will be able to harvest from Mariupol to use for further advances north and west.

**Russian operations in southeastern Ukraine have left large portions of Donetsk Oblast under Ukrainian control. Securing the boundaries of Donetsk Oblast along with the entirety of Luhansk Oblast will likely require a major offensive operation.** Much of the area of Donetsk Oblast outside Russian control is flat and sparsely populated—terrain similar to that on which Russian forces elsewhere have been able to advance rapidly, at least earlier in the war. Russian offensive operations in similar terrain more recently have struggled, however. It is too soon to tell how feasible the Russian conquest of all of Donetsk and Luhansk will be for the Russian military in its current state.

### Key Takeaways

- We now assess that Russian forces have given up on encircling or seizing Kyiv at this time. Russian forces continue to fight to hold their current front-line trace near the city, however, remaining dug into positions to the east, northwest, and west. Russian forces withdrawing from the area around Kyiv appear to be moving north from behind the front line to positions in Belarus.
- Russia is directing some reserves to the effort to connect gains southeast of Kharkiv and Izyum with its front line in Luhansk.

- Ukrainian forces continue to defend in likely isolated pockets in Mariupol. The city will likely fall to the Russians within days.
- A Russian offensive operation to take the rest of unoccupied Donetsk Oblast would be a significant undertaking. It remains unclear if Russia can harvest enough combat power from Mariupol after securing the city or divert reinforcements from elsewhere on a large enough scale to complete it.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark and George Barros

March 28, 4:30pm ET

Ukrainian forces recaptured Irpin, northwest of Kyiv, on March 28. Ongoing Ukrainian counterattacks around Kyiv will likely disrupt ongoing Russian efforts to reconstitute forces and resume major offensive operations to encircle Kyiv. Ukrainian forces additionally repelled Russian attacks toward Bровары, east of Kyiv, in the past 24 hours. Russian forces in northeastern Ukraine remain stalled and did not conduct offensive operations against Chernihiv, Sumy, or Kharkiv in the past 24 hours. Russian forces continue to make grinding progress in Mariupol but were unable to secure territory in either Donbas or toward Mykolaiv.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces have not abandoned their objective to encircle and capture Kyiv, despite Kremlin claims that Russian forces will concentrate on eastern Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces recaptured the Kyiv suburb of Irpin on March 28. Ukrainian forces will likely seek to take advantage of ongoing Russian force rotations to retake further territory northwest of Kyiv in the coming days.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks toward Bровары and did not conduct offensive operations toward Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv. Russian operations in northeastern Ukraine remain stalled.
- The Ukrainian General Staff stated that a battalion tactical group (BTG) of the 1st Guards Tank Army fully withdrew from Ukrainian territory near Sumy back to Russia for possible redeployment – the first Ukrainian report of a Russian unit fully withdrawing into Russia for redeployment to another axis of advance in this conflict.
- Russian forces continued to steadily take territory in Mariupol.
- Ukrainian resistance around Kherson continues to tie down Russian forces in the area. Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations in the southern direction.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark

March 27, 4:30 pm ET

Russian forces have not abandoned efforts to reconstitute forces northwest of Kyiv to resume major offensive operations, and the commander of Russia's Eastern Military District (EMD) may be personally commanding the operations. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russia's 35th Combined Arms Army is rotating damaged units into Belarus and that Russian forces established a command post for all EMD forces operating around Kyiv in the Chernobyl area. Ongoing Russian efforts to replace combat losses in EMD units and deploy additional reinforcements forward are unlikely to enable Russia to successfully resume major operations around Kyiv in the near future. The increasingly static nature of the fighting around Kyiv reflects the incapacity of Russian forces rather than any shift in Russian objectives or efforts at this time.

Ukrainian forces continued to conduct limited counterattacks in several locations, recapturing territory east of Kyiv, in Sumy Oblast, and around Kharkiv in the past 24 hours. Ukrainian counterattacks are

likely enabling Ukrainian forces to recapture key terrain and disrupt Russian efforts to resume major offensive operations. Likely escalating Russian partisan operations around Kherson are additionally tying down Russian forces. Russian forces continue to make slow but steady progress in Mariupol, but Russian assaults largely failed elsewhere in the past 24 hours.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Colonel-General Alexander Chayko may be personally commanding efforts to regroup Russian forces in Belarus and resume operations to encircle Kyiv from the west. The Kremlin is highly unlikely to have abandoned its efforts to encircle Kyiv but will likely be unable to cohere the combat power necessary to resume major offensive operations in the near future.
- Neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces conducted major operations northwest of Kyiv in the last 24 hours.
- Ukrainian forces counterattacking east of Brovary since March 24 successfully retook territory late on March 26.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited counterattacks in Sumy Oblast on March 26-27.
- Fighting continued around Izyum in the past 24 hours, with little territory changing hands.
- Russian forces continued steady advances in Mariupol.
- Ukrainian partisans around Kherson continue to tie down Rosgvardia units in the region, likely hindering Russian capabilities to resume offensive operations in the southern direction.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Fredrick W. Kagan, and George Barros

March 26, 3:00 pm ET

Russian forces continued their unsuccessful efforts to move into positions from which to attack or encircle Kyiv, claims by First Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff Sergei Rudskoi on March 25 notwithstanding. The Russian military continues to concentrate replacements and reinforcements in Belarus and Russia north of Kyiv, to fight for positions on Kyiv's outskirts, and to attempt to complete the encirclement and reduction of Chernihiv. Russian activities around Kyiv show no change in the Russian high command's prioritization of the fight around Ukraine's capital, which continues to occupy the largest single concentration of Russian ground forces in Ukraine. The Russians have not claimed to redeploy forces from Kyiv or any other part of Ukraine to concentrate on fighting in Donbas, and we have observed numerous indicators that they have not done so. The increasingly static nature of the fighting around Kyiv reflects the incapacity of Russian forces rather than any shift in Russian objectives or efforts at this time.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continue their unsuccessful efforts to secure positions from which to attack and seize Kyiv despite the supposed reframing of the Russian military's priorities by First Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff Sergei Rudskoi on March 25.
- The Russians will likely make important progress in seizing the city of Mariupol in the coming days and will probably take the city in the near future. The scale of Russian losses in the fight for Mariupol will determine whether the city's fall will permit Russia to renew large-scale combat operations in eastern Ukraine. It is too soon to tell, but current indicators suggest that Russian losses have been and will continue to be high.
- The Ukrainian General Staff continues to report on challenges Russia faces in finding both troops and equipment to continue the war. The General Staff reports generally match observed patterns and indicators within the Ukrainian battlespace and are likely largely accurate, although we have little independent verification of their details.
- The captured city of Kherson appears to be resisting Russian control in ways that are driving the Russian military and national guard to concentrate forces on securing it. The requirement to secure captured cities can impose a significant cost on overstretched Russian forces and hinder their ability to conduct offensive operations.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, Fredrick W. Kagan, and George Barros

March 25, 5:00 pm ET

The Russian General Staff issued a fictitious report on the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on March 25 claiming Russia's primary objective is to capture the entirety of **Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts**. Sergei Rudskoi, first deputy chief of the Russian General Staff, gave a briefing to Russian press summing up the first month of the Russian invasion on March 25. [1] Rudskoi inaccurately claimed Russian forces have completed "the main tasks of the first stage of the operation," falsely asserting that Russia has heavily degraded the Ukrainian military, enabling Russia to focus on the "main goal" of capturing Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

**Rudskoi's comments were likely aimed mainly at a domestic Russian audience and do not accurately or completely capture current Russian war aims and planned operations.** Russia's justification for the invasion of Ukraine from the outset was the fictitious threat Moscow claimed Ukrainian forces posed to the people in Russian-occupied Donbas. The Kremlin has reiterated this justification for the war frequently as part of efforts to explain the invasion to its people and build or sustain public support for Putin and the war. Rudskoi's framing of the capture of the rest of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as the "main goal" of the operation is in line with this ongoing information operation.

**Rudskoi's assertion that securing the unoccupied portions of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts was always the main objective of Russia's invasion is false.** The Kremlin's initial campaign aimed to conduct airborne and mechanized operations to seize Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and other major Ukrainian cities to force a change of government in Ukraine. [2] Rudskoi's comments could indicate that Russia has scaled back its aims and would now be satisfied with controlling the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, but that reading is likely inaccurate. Russian forces elsewhere in Ukraine have not stopped fighting and have not entirely stopped attempting to advance and seize more territory. They are also attacking and destroying Ukrainian towns and cities, conducting operations and committing war crimes that do not accord with the objectives Rudskoi claims Russia is pursuing.

**Russia continues efforts to rebuild combat power and commit it to the fight to encircle and/or assault Kyiv and take Mariupol and other targets, despite repeated failures and setbacks and continuing Ukrainian counter-attacks.** The Ukrainian General Staff reports that the Russian military is building "consolidated units," likely comprised of individuals or small units drawn from a number of different battalions, brigades, and regiments, to replace combat losses and deploying them on the west bank of the Dnipro near the Chernobyl exclusion zone, among other locations. Russian forces continue their grinding and likely costly advance in Mariupol as well.

**The absence of significant Russian offensive operations throughout most of Ukraine likely reflects the inability of the Russian military to generate sufficient combat power to attack rather than any decision in Moscow to change Russia's war aims or concentrate on the east.** Rudskoi's comments are likely an attempt to gloss the Russian military's failures for a domestic audience and focus attention on the only part of the theater in which Russian troops are making any progress at this point. **The West should not over-read this obvious messaging embedded in a piece of propaganda that continued very few true statements.**

### Key Takeaways

- The Russian General Staff is attempting to adjust the war's narrative so make it appear that Russia is achieving its aims and choosing to restrict operations when in fact it is not achieving its objectives and is being forced to abandon large-scale offensive operations because of its own failures and losses as well as continuing skillful Ukrainian resistance.
- Ukrainian forces claimed to kill the commander of Russia's 49th Combined Arms Army, operating around Kherson.
- Ukrainian counterattacks northwest of Kyiv made further minor progress in the past 24 hours.

- Ukrainian forces additionally conducted a successful counterattack east of Kyiv in the past 24 hours, pushing Russian forces east from Brovary.
- Russian attempts to encircle Chernihiv remain unsuccessful.
- The military situation in northeastern Ukraine did not change in the past 24 hours.
- Russian forces continue to take Mariupol street-by-street and have entered the city center.
- Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations around Kherson in the past 24 hours.

## **Ukraine Conflict Update 19**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

March 25

The ISW Russia team's Ukraine Conflict Update is a semi-weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from March 22-24. All of Russia's team's coverage of the war in Ukraine—including daily military assessments and maps, past Conflict Updates, and several supplemental assessments—are available on our [Ukraine Crisis Coverage](#) landing page.

### **Key Takeaways March 22-24**

- Kyiv remains firm that Russia must return Crimea and Donbas to Ukraine, despite Kremlin claims that Zelensky is willing to discuss recognizing Russian control over these temporarily occupied territories.
- The Kremlin increased its rhetoric accusing the West of posing an existential threat to Russia and refusing to rule out the use of nuclear weapons in the event of threats to Russia to deter the West from further supporting Ukraine.
- Western leaders continued to sound alarms about potential Russian chemical or biological attacks in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin continues to undercount Russian deaths in Ukraine, which have likely passed 10,000 dead since February 24.
- Western sanctions are successfully disrupting Russia's military industry and energy exports.
- Russian forces are likely forcibly relocating Ukrainian citizens to Russia to establish control over occupied areas and gain political leverage.
- The EU and NATO announced both short- and long-term plans to increase military defense spending, troop deployments to Eastern Europe, and military assistance for Ukraine.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 24**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 24, 6:30 pm ET

Russian forces continue to make slow but steady progress in Mariupol, entering the city center on March 24, but conducted few offensive operations elsewhere in the country. Ukrainian counterattacks northwest of Kyiv in the past several days continue to relieve pressure on the city and Russian forces continued to dig in. Ukrainian forces repelled limited Russian attacks northeast of the city and around Kharkiv.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces entered central Mariupol on March 24 and continued to take ground across the city. Local Ukrainian authorities left the city in order to better coordinate regional operations amid the deteriorating situation in Mariupol itself.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a successful attack on Russian ships docked at the occupied port of Berdyansk, likely sinking a landing ship and damaging or sinking another. Ukraine's demonstrated ability to inflict serious damage on Berdyansk may disrupt Russian forces from renewing attempts to reinforce operations in Mariupol and around Kherson by sea.
- Ukrainian forces did not retake any territory in continuing counterattacks northwest of Kyiv but forced Russian troops onto the defensive.
- Ukrainian forces repelled renewed Russian attempts to advance toward Brovary from the northeast and complete the encirclement of Chernihiv.
- Russian forces continue to shell Kharkiv and struck a humanitarian aid delivery point, killing six and wounding 15.
- Russian forces secured several minor advances in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the last 24 hours.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 23, 5:00pm ET

Russian forces continued to settle in for a protracted and stalemated conflict over the last 24 hours, with more reports emerging of Russian troops digging in and laying mines—indications that they have gone over to the defensive. Ukrainian forces continued to conduct limited and effective counterattacks to relieve pressure on Kyiv, although the extent of those counterattacks is likely less than what some Ukrainian officials are claiming. Russian efforts to mobilize additional forces to keep their offensive moving continue to be halting and limited. Russian progress in taking Mariupol city remains slow and grinding. Increasing Russian emphasis on using air, artillery, and rocket/missile bombardments of Ukrainian cities to offset forward offensive momentum raises the urgency of providing Ukraine with systems to defend against these attacks.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continue to go over to the defensive, conducting restricted and localized ground attacks that make little progress.
- Ukrainian forces are conducting limited and successful counterattacks around Kyiv to disrupt Russian operations to encircle the city (which has now become extremely unlikely) and relieve the pressure on the capital.
- The Battle of Mariupol continues as a block-by-block struggle with fierce Ukrainian resistance and limited Russian gains.
- Russia is likely struggling to obtain fresh combat power from Syria and elsewhere rapidly.

## Russia Campaign Assessment March 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 22, 6:00 pm ET

Russian forces did not make any major advances on March 22 and Ukrainian forces conducted local counterattacks northwest of Kyiv and around Mykolaiv. Russian forces around Kyiv and other major cities are increasingly prioritizing long-range bombardment after the failure of Russian ground offensives but are unlikely to force major cities to surrender in this manner. Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations toward the northeastern Ukrainian cities of Chernihiv, Sumy, or Kharkiv in the last 24 hours. Russian forces continued to further reduce the Mariupol pocket.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are likely moving to a phase of protracted bombardment of Ukrainian cities due to the failure of Russia's initial campaign to encircle and seize Kyiv and other major cities.
- Ukrainian forces conducted successful localized counterattacks northwest of Kyiv.
- Russian forces in northeastern Ukraine did not conduct any offensive operations in the past 24 hours.
- Ukrainian forces repelled several Russian assaults in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the past 24 hours.
- Russian forces continue to make slow but steady progress reducing the Mariupol pocket.
- Russia may have failed to appoint an overall commander for its invasion of Ukraine, leading to Russian axes of advance competing for limited supplies and failing to synchronize their operations.

#### What Stalemate Means in Ukraine and Why it Matters

[Click here to read the full article.](#)

By Frederick W. Kagan

The initial Russian campaign to invade and conquer Ukraine is culminating without achieving its objectives—it is being defeated, in other words. The war is settling into a stalemate condition in much of the theater. But the war isn't over and isn't likely to end soon. Nor is the outcome of the war yet clear. The Russians might still win; the Ukrainians might win; the war might expand to involve other countries; or it might turn into a larger scale version of the stalemate in Ukraine's east that had persisted from 2014 to the start of Russia's invasion in February 2022. The failure of Russia's initial military campaign nevertheless marks an important inflection that has implications for the development and execution of Western military, economic, and political strategies. The West must continue supplying Ukraine with the weapons it needs to fight, but it must now also expand its aid dramatically to help keep Ukraine alive as a country even in conditions of stalemate.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 21, 5:30pm ET

Russian forces did not make any major advances on March 21. Russian forces northwest and northeast of Kyiv continued to shell the city and strengthen defensive positions but did not conduct major offensive operations. Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations toward the northeastern Ukrainian cities of Chernihiv, Sumy, or Kharkiv in the last 24 hours. Russian forces continued to reduce the Mariupol pocket and conducted several unsuccessful assaults in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts but did not launch any offensive operations around Kherson.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations northwest of Kyiv and further reinforced their defensive positions.
- Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine and have been unable to solve logistics issues.
- Russian forces continued to make slow but steady progress and shell civilian infrastructure in Mariupol.
- Russian and proxy forces conducted several unsuccessful assaults in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts in the past 24 hours.
- Russia continues to deploy low-quality reserves, including combat-support elements and low-readiness units from the Eastern Military District, to replace losses in frontline units.

- The Ukrainian General Staff warned that Russia seeks to conduct a provocation to bring Belarus into the war, but a Belarusian offensive into western Ukraine remains unlikely to occur or succeed if it did.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 20, 4:00pm ET

Russian forces did not make any major advances on March 20. Russian forces around Kyiv are increasingly establishing defensive positions and preparing to deploy further artillery and fire control assets. Ukrainian forces repelled continuing Russian efforts to seize the city of Izyum, southeast of Kharkiv, and Russian forces did not conduct any other offensive operations in northeast Ukraine. Russian forces continue to make slow but steady progress on Luhansk Oblast and around Mariupol, but did not conduct any offensive operations towards Mykolayiv or Kryvyi Rih.

### Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian General Staff reported for the first time that the Kremlin is preparing its population for a “long war” in Ukraine and implementing increasingly draconian mobilization measures, including deploying youth military organization members aged 17-18.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly killed three Russian regimental commanders in the last 24 hours.
- Russia’s Wagner Group will likely facilitate the deployment of Libyan fighters to Ukraine.
- Russian forces are digging in to positions around Kyiv, including the first reports of the war of Russian forces deploying minefields.
- Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault on Izyum, southeast of Kharkiv, and inflicted heavy casualties.
- Russian forces continued their slow advance into Mariupol but did not achieve any major territorial gains.
- Ukrainian forces launched further localized counterattacks around Mykolayiv.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 19, 3 pm ET

Ukrainian forces have defeated the initial Russian campaign of this war. That campaign aimed to conduct airborne and mechanized operations to seize Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and other major Ukrainian cities to force a change of government in Ukraine. That campaign has culminated. Russian forces continue to make limited advances in some parts of the theater but are very unlikely to be able to seize their objectives in this way. The doctrinally sound Russian response to this situation would be to end this campaign, accept a possibly lengthy operational pause, develop the plan for a new campaign, build up resources for that new campaign, and launch it when the resources and other conditions are ready. The Russian military has not yet adopted this approach. It is instead

continuing to feed small collections of reinforcements into an ongoing effort to keep the current campaign alive. We assess that that effort will fail.

**The ultimate fall of Mariupol is increasingly unlikely to free up enough Russian combat power to change the outcome of the initial campaign dramatically.** Russian forces concentrated considerable combat power around Mariupol drawn from the 8th Combined Arms Army to the east and from the group of Russian forces in Crimea to the west. Had the Russians taken Mariupol quickly or with relatively few losses they would likely have been able to move enough combat power west toward Zaporizhiya and Dnipro to threaten those cities. The protracted siege of Mariupol is seriously weakening Russian forces on that axis, however. The confirmed death of the commander of the Russian 150th Motorized Rifle Division likely indicates the scale of the damage Ukrainian defenders are inflicting on those formations. The block-by-block fighting in Mariupol itself is costing the Russian military time, initiative, and combat power. If and when Mariupol ultimately falls the Russian forces now besieging it may not be strong enough to change the course of the campaign dramatically by attacking to the west.

**Russian forces in the south appear to be focusing on a drive toward Kryvyi Rih, presumably to isolate and then take Zaporizhiya and Dnipro from the west but are unlikely to secure any of those cities in the coming weeks if at all.** Kryvyi Rih is a city of more than 600,000 and heavily fortified according to the head of its military administration. Zaporizhiya and Dnipro are also large. The Russian military has been struggling to take Mariupol, smaller than any of them, since the start of the war with more combat power than it is currently pushing toward Kryvyi Rih. The Russian advance on that axis is thus likely to bog down as all other Russian advances on major cities have done.

**The Russian military continues to commit small groups of reinforcements to localized fighting rather than concentrating them to launch new large-scale operations.** Russia continues to commit units drawn from its naval infantry from all fleets, likely because those units are relatively more combat-ready than rank-and-file Russian regiments and brigades. The naval infantry belonging to the Black Sea Fleet is likely the largest single pool of ready reserve forces the Russian military has not yet committed. Much of that naval infantry has likely been embarked on amphibious landing ships off the Odesa coast since early in the war, presumably ready to land near Odesa as soon as Russian forces from Crimea secured a reliable ground line of communication (GLOC) from Crimea to Odesa. The likelihood that Russian forces from Crimea will establish such a GLOC in the near future is becoming remote, however, and the Russian military has apparently begun using elements of the Black Sea Fleet naval infantry to reinforce efforts to take Mariupol.

**The culmination of the initial Russian campaign is creating conditions of stalemate throughout most of Ukraine.** Russian forces are digging in around the periphery of Kyiv and elsewhere, attempting to consolidate political control over areas they currently occupy, resupplying and attempting to reinforce units in static positions, and generally beginning to set conditions to hold in approximately their current forward positions for an indefinite time. Maxar imagery of Russian forces digging trenches and revetments in Kyiv Oblast over the past several days supports this assessment.<sup>[1]</sup> Comments by Duma members about forcing Ukraine to surrender by exhaustion in May could reflect a revised Russian approach to ending this conflict on terms favorable to Moscow.

**Stalemate will likely be very violent and bloody, especially if it protracts.** Stalemate is not armistice or ceasefire. It is a condition in war in which each side conducts offensive operations that do not fundamentally alter the situation. Those operations can be very damaging and cause enormous casualties. The World War I battles of the Somme, Verdun, and Passchendaele were all fought in conditions of stalemate and did not break the stalemate. **If the war in Ukraine settles into a stalemate condition Russian forces will continue to bomb and bombard Ukrainian cities, devastating them and killing civilians, even as Ukrainian forces impose losses on Russian attackers and conduct counter-attacks of their own. The Russians could hope to break Ukrainians' will to continue fighting under such circumstances by demonstrating Kyiv's inability to expel Russian forces or stop their attacks even if the Russians are demonstrably unable to take Ukraine's cities.** Ukraine's defeat of the initial Russian campaign may therefore set conditions for a devastating protraction of the conflict and a dangerous new period testing the resolve of Ukraine and the West. Continued and expanded Western support to Ukraine will be vital to seeing Ukraine through that new period.

#### Key Takeaways:

- We now assess that the initial Russian campaign to seize Ukraine's capital and major cities and force regime change has failed;
- Russian forces continue efforts to restore momentum to this culminated campaign, but those efforts will likely also fail;

- Russian troops will continue trying to advance to within effective artillery range of the center of Kyiv, but prospects for their success are unclear;
- The war will likely descend into a phase of bloody stalemate that could last for weeks or months;
- Russia will expand efforts to bombard Ukrainian civilians in order to break Ukrainians' will to continue fighting (at which the Russians will likely fail);
- The most dangerous current Russian advance is from Kherson north toward Kryvyi Rih in an effort to isolate Zaporizhiya and Dnipro from the west. Russian forces are unlikely to be able to surround or take Kryvyi Rih in the coming days, and may not be able to do so at all without massing much larger forces for the effort than they now have available on that axis;
- The Russians appear to have abandoned plans to attack Odesa at least in the near term.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 18, 5:30pm ET

Ukrainian forces conducted a major successful counterattack around Mykolayiv in the past several days, and Russian forces continued to secure territorial gains only around Mariupol on March 18. Russian forces face growing morale and supply problems, including growing reports of self-mutilation among Russian troops to avoid deployment to Ukraine and shortages of key guided munitions. The Ukrainian General Staff continued to report on March 18 that Russia has failed to achieve its strategic objectives in Ukraine, including destroying the Ukrainian Armed Forces, capturing Kyiv, and establishing control over Ukraine to the east bank of the Dnipro River—the first time the Ukrainian General Staff included this territorial conquest as an explicit Russian objective. The Ukrainian General Staff additionally stated that Ukrainian forces “continue step by step to liberate the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine in all directions” on March 18, the first Ukrainian mention of conducting counterattacks “in all directions.”

### Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russia has “significantly exhausted its human resources” due to battle casualties, cases of self-mutilation to avoid deployment, and psychological factors.
- Ukrainian forces likely conducted a successful counteroffensive against Russian forces around Mykolayiv in the past several days.
- The ability of Ukrainian forces to conduct a successful major counterattack indicates Russian forces attempting to encircle Mykolayiv likely overstretched, and Russian forces are unlikely to have the capability to resume offensive operations toward Odesa in the near term.
- Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations northwest or northeast of Kyiv on March 18.
- Russian forces continue to make steady progress reducing the Mariupol pocket.
- Ukrainian forces halted a Russian attempt to advance southeast of Kharkiv, through the city of Izyum, in the past 24 hours. Russia is deploying additional reserves to reinforce the Kharkiv axis of advance.
- Russian and proxy forces made minor territorial gains north of the city of Severodonetsk in Luhansk Oblast and will likely assault the city itself in the next 24-48 hours.
- Ukrainian military intelligence created an official website to provide support and guidance to Ukrainian fighters and civilians in Russian-occupied territory.

## Ukraine Conflict Update 17

[Click here to read the full report](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

with the Critical Threats Project, AEI

March 18, 2022

ISW published its most recent [Russian campaign assessment](#) at 5:30 pm EST on March 17.

The ISW Russia team is relaunching its Ukraine Conflict Updates as a semi-weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from March 15 – March 17.

#### Key Takeaways March 15-17

- Russian and Ukrainian negotiators have likely agreed that Ukraine will not join NATO, but the Kremlin maintains maximalist demands of Ukraine that it is unlikely to drop in the coming weeks.
- Russian media continues to amplify government officials and “experts” who falsely claim that the United States is preparing to wage biological or chemical war on Russia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin blamed Ukraine for allegedly developing nuclear weapons with foreign assistance and falsely claimed that Ukraine planned to conduct a nuclear attack against Russia.
- The Kremlin continued to claim that Ukraine is the aggressor and that Russia’s invasion is going according to plan and will soon accomplish its objectives.
- The Kremlin downplayed the impact of sanctions on the Russian economy and took additional steps to mitigate and counter their effects.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated on March 15 that Belarusian soldiers will not enter Ukraine and accused Ukraine of trying to drag Belarus into the war.
- The Kremlin is kidnapping local leaders to set conditions for controlling and subduing occupied Ukrainian territory.
- NATO defense ministers agreed to deploy additional troops to NATO’s eastern borders but reiterated that the Allies will not create a no-fly zone over or send troops to Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin asked China for military and economic support for the war in Ukraine. China has neither confirmed nor denied whether they will provide aid to Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 17, 5:30pm ET

Russian forces did not make any major advances and Ukrainian forces carried out several local counterattacks on March 17.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces made little territorial progress and continued to deploy reserve elements—including from the 1st Guards Tank Army and 810th Naval Infantry Brigade—in small force packets that are unlikely to prove decisive. Russian forces continue to suffer heavy casualties around Kharkiv, and Russian attempts to bypass the city of Izyum are unlikely to succeed. Russian forces continued assaults on Mariupol on March 17 but did not conduct any other successful advances from Crimea.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continue to make steady territorial gains around Mariupol and are increasingly targeting residential areas of the city.
- Ukrainian forces northwest of Kyiv launched several local counterattacks and inflicted heavy damage on Russian forces.
- Ukrainian forces repelled Russian operations around Kharkiv and reported killing a regimental commander.
- Ukrainian intelligence reports that Russia may have expended nearly its entire store of precision cruise missiles in the first twenty days of its invasion.
- Russian forces deployed unspecified reserve elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army and Baltic Fleet Naval Infantry to northeastern Ukraine on March 17.
- Russia may be parcelling out elements of the reserve force that could conduct an amphibious operation along the Black Sea coast to support ongoing assaults on Mariupol, further reducing the likelihood of a Russian amphibious assault on Odesa.

- Ukrainian forces shot down 10 Russian aircraft—including five jets, three helicopters, and two UAVs—on March 16, and Ukrainian forces continue to successfully contest Russian air operations.

Russian forces face mounting difficulties replacing combat casualties and replacing expended munitions. The Ukrainian General Staff stated on March 17 that Russian forces will begin another wave of mobilization for the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) 1st Army Corps on March 20. [2] Ukrainian intelligence continued to report Russian forces face difficulties manning both combat and support units and increasing desertion rates.[3] The General Staff further reported that Russian forces are increasingly using indiscriminate weapons against residential areas because they used almost their entire supply of "Kalibr" and "Iskander" cruise missiles in the first 20 days of the invasion.[4] It is unclear if the Ukrainian General Staff means Russian forces have used almost all precision munitions earmarked for the operation in Ukraine or almost all missiles in Russia's total arsenal—though likely the former.

The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported several details on Russian efforts to recruit Syrian mercenaries on March 17.[5] The GUR reported that the Russian military ordered its base in Hmeimim, Syria to send up to 300 fighters from Syria to Ukraine daily. The GUR additionally reported that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has promised to recruit 40,000 Syrian fighters to deploy to Ukraine. The GUR reported Russian authorities are promising Syrian recruits that they will exclusively act as police in occupied territories. Finally, the GUR reported low morale among Syrian recruits, including several cases of self-mutilation to avoid being deployed, and claimed many fighters see deploying to Russia and Belarus as an opportunity to desert and migrate to the EU.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment March 16

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 16, 5:30pm ET

Russian forces did not make any major advances and Ukrainian forces carried out several local counterattacks on March 17.[1] Russian forces made little territorial progress and continued to deploy reserve elements—including from the 1st Guards Tank Army and 810th Naval Infantry Brigade—in small force packets that are unlikely to prove decisive. Russian forces continue to suffer heavy casualties around Kharkiv, and Russian attempts to bypass the city of Izyum are unlikely to succeed. Russian forces continued assaults on Mariupol on March 17 but did not conduct any other successful advances from Crimea.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continue to make steady territorial gains around Mariupol and are increasingly targeting residential areas of the city.
- Ukrainian forces northwest of Kyiv launched several local counterattacks and inflicted heavy damage on Russian forces.
- Ukrainian forces repelled Russian operations around Kharkiv and reported killing a regimental commander.
- Ukrainian intelligence reports that Russia may have expended nearly its entire store of precision cruise missiles in the first twenty days of its invasion.
- Russian forces deployed unspecified reserve elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army and Baltic Fleet Naval Infantry to northeastern Ukraine on March 17.
- Russia may be parcelling out elements of the reserve force that could conduct an amphibious operation along the Black Sea coast to support ongoing assaults on

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further reported that Russian forces are increasingly using indiscriminate weapons against

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to avoid being deployed, and claimed many fighters see deploying to Russia and Belarus as an

opportunity to desert and migrate to the EU.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 15, 5:30 pm ET

Local company- and battalion-level attacks by Russian forces northwest of Kyiv on March 14-15 likely indicate the largest-scale offensive operations that Russian forces attempting to encircle Kyiv can support at this time. Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations northeast of the city, around Sumy, and only limited (and unsuccessful) attacks southeast of Kharkiv.

Russian force generation efforts, including reservist and conscript call-ups and the ongoing transport of Syrian fighters to Russia and Belarus, are unable to change the balance of forces around Kyiv within the coming week. **Russian forces have not conducted simultaneous attacks along their multiple axes of advance across Ukraine since March 4 and are unlikely to do so in the next week.**<sup>[1]</sup>

Russian forces in southeastern Ukraine continue to demonstrate the greatest capabilities to date and are steadily advancing in three directions: northeast from Kherson, taking territory in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, and reducing the Ukrainian pocket in Mariupol. Russian forces are unlikely to successfully encircle Mykolayiv and threaten Odesa in the near future but retain uncommitted Naval Infantry reserves that could conduct an amphibious operation or disembark to reinforce Russian ground operations, as Russia has employed Naval Infantry elsewhere. Russia may seek to encircle Zaporizhya by advancing northeast up the west bank of the Dnipro River after failing to break through Ukrainian forces directly south of the city on the east bank. Russian forces are making slow but steady progress against Ukrainian defenders on the line of contact in Donbas and likely seek to force them out of their prepared defensive positions.

**With Russian forces likely unable to complete the encirclement of Kyiv or resume mobile offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine in the near future, the Russian capture of Mariupol will likely be the next key inflection in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.** Russian forces have successfully encircled Mariupol and are conducting daily assaults on the western and eastern outskirts of the city. Russian air, missile, and artillery strikes continue to target residential areas and civilian infrastructure to force the city to capitulate. Russian forces have encircled the city to a depth that will likely prevent the defenders from breaking out and prevent Ukrainian efforts to relieve the defenders. Russian forces will likely be able to capture Mariupol or force it to capitulate despite strong Ukrainian defenses. The Russian capture of Mariupol will free up Russian forces, likely including large portions of the 8th Combined Arms Army, to threaten Ukrainian defenders along the line of contact in Donbas with encirclement or alternatively reinforce a Russian offensive toward Mykolayiv and Odesa. This assessment assumes that the defenders in Mariupol will run out of ammunition and/or water at some point in the relatively near future. Mariupol has been heavily fortified for years, however, and it is possible that its defenders secured sufficient supplies in advance to hold out longer. The Russians will likely continue to escalate bombardments to the point of simply destroying the city if that appears to be the case, but the reduction of Mariupol in this way could take considerably longer.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are unlikely to launch offensive operations to encircle Kyiv larger than the scattered Russian attacks observed northwest of Kyiv targeting Irpin on March 14 and Guta-Mezhyhirka on March 15 within the coming week but may launch further tactical attacks.
- Russian forces continued to assault Mariupol from the east and west.
- Russian forces did not conduct major offensive operations toward northeastern Kyiv in the past 24 hours.
- Russian forces attempting to encircle Kharkiv continue to face supply shortages, particularly regarding ammunition.
- The Russian military falsely claimed to have captured the entirety of Kherson Oblast on March 15 but did not conduct any major operations toward either Zaporizhya or Mykolayiv.
- Russia is unlikely to launch an unsupported amphibious operation against Odesa until Russian forces secure a ground line of communication to the city, but Russian Naval Infantry retain the capability to conduct a landing along the Black Sea coast.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 14, 5:00 pm ET

Russian forces made small territorial gains in Luhansk Oblast on March 14 but did not conduct any major attacks toward Kyiv or in northeastern Ukraine. Russian forces continue to assemble reinforcements and attempt to improve logistical support in both the Kyiv and southern operational

directions. Ongoing Russian efforts to replace combat losses with both Russian replacements and non-Russian sources, including Syrian fighters and the Wagner Group, are unlikely to enable Russia to resume major offensive operations within the coming week.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted several limited attacks northwest of Kyiv on March 14, unsuccessfully attempting to bridge the Irpin River.
- Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations east of Kyiv and continued to prioritize improving logistics and reinforcing combat units.
- The continued ability of Ukrainian forces to carry out successful local counterattacks around Kharkiv indicates that Russian forces are unlikely to successfully bypass Kharkiv from the southeast to advance toward Dnipro and Zaporizhia in the near term.
- Russian and proxy forces continue to achieve slow but steady territorial gains in Donetsk Oblast after initial failures in the first week of the Russian invasion.
- Ukrainian forces halted resumed Russian attacks from Kherson toward Mykolayiv and Kryyyi Rih on March 14.
- Russia will likely deploy small units of Syrian fighters to Ukraine within the week and is confirmed to have deployed private military company (PMC) forces.
- Russian and Belarusian forces increased their activity near the Ukrainian border in the last 24 hours in a likely effort to pin down Ukrainian forces but likely do not have the capability to open a new axis of advance into western Ukraine.
- Russia and China deny that Russia seeks military aid from China and claimed that Russia does not need additional military support to complete its objectives in Ukraine.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 13, 4:00 pm EST

Russian forces again conducted few ground offensives on March 13, only securing new terrain in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces predominantly took measures to restore combat readiness and regrouped combat units as of noon local time on March 13.[1] Russian forces continue to assemble reinforcements and attempt to improve logistical support in both the Kyiv and southern operational directions. Russian forces may intend to resume larger-scale attacks on both axes of advance in the coming week, but will likely take longer to (or may never) cohere the combat power necessary to complete the encirclement of Kyiv.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations northwest of Kyiv for the third day in a row.
- Russian forces did not conduct attacks toward northeastern Kyiv and prioritized reinforcing their lines of communication and logistics routes.
- Russian and proxy forces successfully captured several towns north of Mariupol in Donetsk Oblast on March 13, the only offensive ground actions of the day.
- Ukrainian protests in occupied Kherson are likely expanding.
- Russia is diluting its international deployments in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to reinforce operations in Ukraine and pulling additional forces from Russia's far east.
- Ukrainian intelligence reported Russia will deploy preexisting pro-Assad Syrian units to Ukraine, in addition to previously announced plans to recruit new Syrian and Libyan mercenaries. These forces are unlikely to enable Russia to favorably change the balance of forces around Kyiv in the next week but may provide a longer-term pool of low-quality replacements.
- Russian ballistic missiles killed 35 Ukrainians at the Yavoriv military training center near Poland in a likely effort to interdict Western aid deliveries to Ukraine—following up on the Kremlin's March 12 announcement it will treat international aid shipments as military targets.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 12

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 12, 4:00 pm EST

**Russian forces secured limited advances east of Kyiv and north from Crimea on March 12 but continue to face logistical challenges, mounting casualties, and sustained Ukrainian counterattacks.** Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations northwest of Kyiv in the past 24 hours. Russian forces made limited advances around Chernihiv and toward Kyiv's eastern outskirts after pausing for several days. Continued Ukrainian counterattacks and successful operations by Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces continue to threaten Russia's long line of communication in northeastern Ukraine. Russian forces captured unspecified "eastern outskirts" of Mariupol on March 12 and continue to shell the city in a likely effort to force it to capitulate.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations northwest of Kyiv for the second day in a row.
- Russian forces resumed limited attacks toward northeastern Kyiv and renewed efforts to fully encircle Chernihiv.
- Ongoing Ukrainian counterattacks in northeastern Ukraine are likely forcing Russia to redeploy forces away from offensive operations toward Kyiv to consolidate its long line of communication.
- Russian forces made limited territorial gains in eastern Mariupol and continued to shell the city.
- The Ukrainian General Staff reported Russian forces conducted a new advance northeast from Kherson along the western bank of the Dnipro.
- The Ukrainian military claimed to have damaged or destroyed 31 Russian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) as of March 11.
- The Kremlin likely seeks to deter continuing Western military aid shipments to Ukraine, threatening that Russia will view Western military aid shipments to Ukraine as legitimate military targets on March 12.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 11

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 11, 5:30pm EST

**Russian ground forces attempting to encircle and take Kyiv began another pause to resupply and refit combat units on March 11 after failed attacks March 8-10.** Russian forces also appear to be largely stalemated around Kharkiv. Russian advances from Crimea toward Mykolaiv and Zaporizhya and in the east around Donetsk and Luhansk made no progress in the last 24 hours, and Russian forces in the south face growing morale and supply issues. The Ukrainian General Staff asserted Russia has so far failed to take its territorial objectives for the war and will likely increasingly turn to strikes on civilian targets and psychological operations to undermine civilian support for the Ukrainian government.<sup>[1]</sup> Uncoordinated and sporadic Russian offensive operations against major Ukrainian cities support the Ukrainian General Staff's assessment that Russian forces face growing morale and supply issues and have lost the initiative. The Ukrainian General Staff stated on March 11 that Ukrainian forces are "actively defending and conducting successful counterattacks in all directions," but did not state where reported counterattacks are occurring.<sup>[2]</sup>

The Kremlin likely seeks to increase its combat power by drawing Belarus into the war and leveraging Syrian proxies, in addition to ongoing efforts to directly replace Russian combat losses through individual conscripts that are unlikely to be well-enough trained or motivated to generate effective new combat power. Putin is reportedly conducting an internal purge of general officers and intelligence personnel and recalibrating Russia's war effort to sustain combat operations far longer than the Kremlin initially planned. Russia likely requires a new wave of combat-effective reservists or recruits in a short period of time to achieve its objectives in Ukraine but is unlikely to be

able to generate such a wave. Russian aircraft likely conducted an attempted false-flag attack on Belarusian territory on March 11. The Kremlin is likely pressuring Belarus to enter the war in Ukraine to support Russian forces, though Belarusian President Lukashenko is likely attempting to delay or prevent his entry into the war to avoid costly Western sanctions and Belarusian combat losses. The Kremlin additionally announced plans on March 11 to deploy foreign fighters, including up to 16,000 Syrian fighters, to Ukraine. The Kremlin is highly unlikely to abandon its continuing main effort to encircle and capture Kyiv and will continue to feed replacements and reinforcements into this operation.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian operations around Kyiv remained largely stalled over the past 24 hours and Russian forces conducted another pause to resupply and refit frontline units.
- Russian forces did not secure any new territory in northeastern Ukraine and may be redeploying forces attacking eastern Kyiv to defend against Ukrainian counterattacks in Sumy Oblast.
- Russian forces remain pinned down attempting to reduce Mariupol by siege and bombardment.
- Ukrainian forces halted Russian advances north and west from Crimea as Russian forces face growing supply and morale issues.
- Russian aircraft likely conducted an attempted false-flag attack on Belarusian territory on March 11 in an effort to draw Belarus into the war.
- The Kremlin announced plans to deploy foreign fighters, including up to 16,000 Syrian fighters, to Ukraine.
- Putin reportedly fired several generals and arrested FSB intelligence officers in an internal purge.
- Ukrainian forces killed the commander of Russia's 29th Combined Arms Army. High casualties among Russian general officers indicate the poor quality of Russian command and control, requiring Russian generals to deploy forward and risk Ukrainian fire to command their forces.
- Ukrainian air force and air defense operations continue to hinder Russian ground forces maneuver by likely limiting Russian close air support and exposing Russian mechanized forces to Ukrainian air and artillery attacks.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 10

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 10, 4:00 pm EST

The likelihood is increasing that Ukrainian forces could fight to a standstill the Russian ground forces attempting to encircle and take Kyiv. Russian forces also appear to be largely stalemated around Kharkiv and distracted from efforts to seize that city. Russian advances in the south around Mykolaiv and toward Zaporizhya and in the east around Donetsk and Luhansk made little progress as well in the last 24 hours. Russia likely retains much greater combat power in the south and east and will probably renew more effective offensive operations in the coming days, but the effective reach and speed of such operations is questionable given the general performance of the Russian military to date. There are as yet no indications that the Russian military is reorganizing, reforming, learning lessons, or taking other measures that would lead to a sudden change in the pace or success of its operations, although the numerical disparities between Russia and Ukraine leave open the possibility that Moscow will be able to restore rapid mobility or effective urban warfare to the battlefield.

Russian forces around Kyiv did not attempt to renew offensive operations on a multi-battalion scale on March 10 following the failure of limited efforts on March 8-9. Ukrainian forces badly damaged a Russian armored column in the Brovary area east of Kyiv, likely further disrupting Russian efforts to set conditions for offensive operations on the east bank of the Dnipro. Ukrainian resistance all along the Russian lines of communication from eastern Kyiv to the Russian border near Sumy continues to disrupt Russian efforts to bring more combat power to bear near the capital. The episodic, limited, and largely unsuccessful Russian offensive operations around Kyiv increasingly support the Ukrainian General Staff's repeated assessments that Russia lacks the combat power near the capital to launch successful offensive operations on a large scale.

## Key Takeaways

- Russian operations around Kyiv remained largely stalled over the past 24 hours.
- Ukrainian forces badly damaged a Russian armored unit east of the capital, likely disrupting Russian efforts to encircle or assault the city from the east.
- Russian forces continue to struggle in efforts to seize Chernihiv city and to secure the long ground lines of communication from Sumy, which the Ukrainians still hold, to eastern Kyiv.
- A new Russian invasion from western Belarus, with or without Belarusian ground forces' support, appears increasingly unlikely.
- Russian forces remain pinned down attempting to reduce Mariupol by siege and bombardment.
- Russian efforts to bypass Mykolayiv and establish a reliable ground line of communication across the Southern Bug River to the north of Mykolayiv remain stalled.
- Ukrainian air force and air defense operations continue to hinder Russian ground forces maneuver by likely limiting Russian close air support and exposing Russian mechanized forces to Ukrainian air and artillery attacks.

## Warning Update: Russia May Conduct a Chemical or Radiological False-Flag

### Attack as a Pretext for Greater Aggression against Ukraine

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

By Katherine Lawlor with Kateryna Stepanenko

**Key takeaway:** The Kremlin has set informational conditions to blame Ukraine for a Russian-conducted or Russian-fabricated chemical or radiological false-flag attack against civilians as a pretext for further Russian escalation. The Kremlin is likely still evaluating this course of action but is building out the necessary conditions to justify broader violence against civilians. That risk must be addressed. The United States and NATO must "pre-bunk" such Kremlin efforts, destroy in advance Moscow's efforts to create informational cover for escalation, and deter Russia's potential use of a chemical or radiological weapon.

Recent Russian state media narratives have built upon a long-running Kremlin information operation to falsely claim that Ukraine, the United States, and NATO are plotting a chemical or radiological attack on Russia or Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory. Russia may conduct or fabricate such an attack and blame Ukraine and NATO to justify additional aggression against Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 9

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Fredrick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 9, 3:00 PM EST

Russian operations to continue the encirclement of and assault on Kyiv have likely begun, although on a smaller scale and in a more ad hoc manner than ISW expected. The equivalent of a Russian reinforced brigade reportedly tried to advance toward Kyiv through its western outskirts and made little progress. Smaller operations continued slowly to consolidate and gradually to extend the encirclement to the southwest of the capital. Russian operations in the eastern approaches to Kyiv remain in a lull, likely because the Russians are focusing on securing the long lines of communication running to those outskirts from Russian bases around Sumy and Chernihiv in the face of skillful and determined Ukrainian harassment of those lines. The battle for Kyiv is likely to continue to be a drawn-out affair unless the Russians can launch a more concentrated and coherent attack than they have yet shown the ability to conduct.

The Russian military is clearly struggling to mobilize reserve manpower to offset losses and fill out new units. The Kremlin admitted that conscripts have been fighting in Ukraine (in violation of Russian law) for the first time on March 9, although in a customarily bizarre fashion: according to the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin himself discovered that conscripts were operating in Ukraine while he was reviewing a report on the conflict. The Kremlin says Russian military judicial authorities will reportedly open an investigation into this practice and punish those responsible.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin himself would, of course, ultimately be responsible for having issued the mobilization orders that sent conscripts to the front. Reports have also surfaced that students at medical and theater schools were being conscripted in late February, along with some denials of those reports.<sup>[2]</sup> Social media users also flagged the movement of Russian peacekeeping forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, speculating that they may be withdrawing to participate in the war in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> ISW cannot independently verify any of these reports. Their general tenor, however, aligns with our published assessment that Russia faces challenges in generating a new wave of combat-effective reservists or recruits in a short period of time and our assessment that Russia will need such a wave to complete its objectives.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces have likely begun renewed offensive operations into Kyiv and to continue its encirclement on the west, but have not made much progress.
- Russian troops east of the Dnipro near Kyiv are likely attempting to consolidate their lines of communication against significant Ukrainian counter-attacks and disruption to set conditions for attacking the capital from the east.
- Russia is unlikely to attempt to seize Kharkiv through a ground offensive in the coming days, but will probably continue efforts to encircle and/or bypass it.
- Russian and Russian proxy forces in Donetsk and Luhansk are driving to gain control of the full territorial extent of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, but have not yet done so.
- Mariupol remains encircled and under bombardment.
- Russian forces continue to prepare for operations against Zaporizhya City but have not yet initiated them at scale.
- Russian forces from Kherson appear to be encircling Mykolayiv from the east but have not yet crossed the Southern Bug River. Russian operations against Odesa are unlikely to commence before Russia establishes a secure line of control from Crimea across the Southern Bug.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 8

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Fredrick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 8, 3:00 PM EST

**Russian forces continued concentrating in the eastern, northwestern, and western outskirts of Kyiv for an assault on the capital in the coming 24-96 hours.** The reported appearance of forces belonging to Chechen leader Ramazan Kadyrov, Russia's Rosgvardia internal security formations, and the Liga (former Wagner) Private Military Company in the western outskirts of Kyiv may indicate that the Russian military is struggling to assemble sufficient conventional combat power to launch its assault on the capital. Russian forces near Kyiv made limited gains and prepared for limited drives to continue their attempted encirclement to the west.

Ukrainian forces have continued to challenge the lengthy Russian ground lines of communication leading from near Sumy to eastern Kyiv. Russian forces near Kharkiv have been steadily diverting to secure and extend those lines over the past few days, as we have reported. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 8 that Russian troops currently near Chernihiv appear to be moving east. We assess that those forces may seek to link up with troops coming from near Sumy to help them consolidate and protect their extended lines in support of the planned offensive against Kyiv.

The situation in eastern Ukraine and southwestern Ukraine remained largely unchanged in the past 24 hours. Ukrainian General Staff reporting of additional Russian efforts to advance on the city of Zaporizhya likely confirm that Russia intends to make blocking that city a priority. The forces Russia is so far moving toward Zaporizhya appear to be far too small to encircle or take it.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces are consolidating and preparing for further operations along the western and eastern outskirts of Kyiv, especially in the Irpin area in the west and the Brovary area in the east;
- Ukrainian forces are challenging the extended Russian lines reaching from Sumy, which Russian forces have not yet taken, to the eastern outskirts of Kyiv;
- Russian troops are likely attempting to bypass Mykolayiv and cross the Southern Bug upriver of that city to permit an advance on Odesa combined with an impending amphibious operation against that city; and
- Russian forces are also driving north from Crimea toward the city of Zaporizhyia.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 7**

**[Click here to read the full update.](#)**

Fredrick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 7, 3:00 PM EST

Russian forces are concentrating in the eastern, northwestern, and western outskirts of Kyiv for an assault on the capital in the coming 24-96 hours. The Russians are bringing up supplies and reinforcements as well as conducting artillery, air, and missile attacks to weaken defenses and intimidate defenders in advance of such an assault. It is too soon to gauge the likely effectiveness of any Russian attempt to complete the encirclement of Kyiv or to seize the city at this time. If Russian troops have been able to resupply, reorganize, and plan deliberate and coordinated simultaneous operations along the several axes of advance around and into the capital, they may be more successful in this operation than they have in previous undertakings. Operations near Kyiv in the past 72 hours have not offered enough evidence to evaluate that likelihood.

Russian troops in southern Ukraine continue to divide their efforts between attacks westward toward Mykolayiv and Odesa, attacks northward toward Zaporizhyia, and attacks eastward toward Mariupol and Donbas. Failure to focus on any single line of advance has likely hindered Russian operations and will probably continue to do so. Russian troops in Kherson Oblast appear to be feeling their way around Mykolayiv, likely seeking to find a route across the Southern Bug River that would allow them to bypass Mykolayiv itself and resume their advance on Odesa. Those heading toward Zaporizhyia currently lack the combat power likely necessary to encircle or take that large city. They could, however, set conditions for successful operations against Zaporizhyia once reinforcements arrive following the fall of Mariupol and the opening of a wide land route westward from Donbas.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces are consolidating and preparing for further operations along the western and eastern outskirts of Kyiv, especially in the Irpin area on the west and the Brovary area on the east;
- Ukrainian forces are challenging the extended Russian lines reaching from Sumy, which Russian forces have not yet taken, to the eastern outskirts of Kyiv;
- Russian troops are likely attempting to bypass Mykolayiv and cross the Southern Bug upriver of that city to permit an advance on Odesa that will combine with an impending amphibious operation against that city; and
- Russian forces are driving north from Crimea toward the city of Zaporizhyia.

#### **Ukraine Conflict Update 16**

**[Click here to read the full update.](#)**

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

#### **Key Takeaways March 5-6**

- Russian forces spent the past 24 hours largely regrouping and preparing to renew offensive operations around Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mykolayiv.
- The Ukrainian General Staff reports the presence of a large concentration of Russian forces west of Kharkiv that it assesses will launch a wide offensive southwest toward the Dnipro River, although no such offensive has begun as of this publication.
- Russia violated two Russian-Ukrainian ceasefire agreements, collapsing efforts to establish a humanitarian corridor to help evacuate civilians from Mariupol and

Volnovakha on March 5 and 6.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin has not demonstrated any willingness to de-escalate with Ukraine or the international community, nor has he provided reasonable demands that would lay the groundwork for de-escalation or negotiations.
- The Kremlin is likely laying the domestic information groundwork for a declaration of martial law in Russia should Russian President Vladimir Putin decide that mass mobilization and conscription are necessary to achieve his objectives.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin allowed for the confiscation of assets belonging to “corrupt” Russian officials on March 6, likely to acquire new revenue streams at the expense of alienating some supporters.
- The Kremlin is attempting to deter US or European bans on Russian oil exports by claiming that a ban would devastate world oil markets.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin compared Western sanctions to a “declaration of war” on March 5 as the Kremlin began to retaliate against foreign businesses.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 6**

[\*\*Click here to read the full update.\*\*](#)

Fredrick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 6, 2:00 PM EST

The military situation on the ground has not changed significantly in the past 24 hours. Russian forces continue to mass for renewed offensive operations east and west of Kyiv, west of Kharkiv, and toward Mykolayiv-Odesa but have not yet initiated new large-scale ground attacks. Russia has increased aerial and artillery/rocket attacks on civilian positions and infrastructure, including known evacuation corridors. Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a second counter-attack in two days, this time near Mariupol. The Ukrainian air force and air defense forces continue to operate, inflicting damage on Russian ground forces and disrupting Russian air and missile operations.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces spent the past 24 hours largely regrouping and preparing for renewing offensive operations around Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mykolayiv.
- The Ukrainian General Staff reports the presence of a large concentration of Russian forces west of Kharkiv that it assesses will launch a wide offensive southwest toward the Dnipro River, although no such offensive has begun as of this publication.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 5**

[\*\*Click here to read the full update.\*\*](#)

Fredrick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 5, 3:00 PM EST

Russian forces in Ukraine may have entered a possibly brief operational pause on March 5 as they prepare to resume operations against Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mykolayiv, and possibly Odesa in the next 24-48 hours. Russian troops did not launch major ground offensive operations against Kyiv, Kharkiv, or Mykolayiv in the last 24 hours. Ukrainian forces near Kharkiv, on the other hand, conducted a counter-offensive that reportedly penetrated to the Ukrainian-Russian border.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces conducted no major offensive operations against the cities of Kyiv, Kharkiv, or Mykolayiv in the past 24 hours;
- Russian troops continued to encircle, bomb, and shell Mariupol;
- Russian forces east of Kharkiv and in northern Luhansk Oblast appear to be trying to link up;

- Russian troops around Kherson city are likely preparing to resume offensive operations against Mykolaiv and ultimately Odesa; and
- Russian naval infantry in Crimea continue to prepare for amphibious operations, which would most likely occur near Odesa.

### [Explainer on Russian Conscription, Reserve, and Mobilization](#)

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Brian Babcock-Lumish, Frederick W. Kagan, Kateryna Stepanenko

March 5, 2022

- *The early announcement of the 2022 spring draft is unlikely to increase Russian combat power in Ukraine in the near term.*
- *Recent Russian efforts to create a Western-style reserve force are unlikely to materially impact combat operations in Ukraine.*
- *As Russia exhausts its high-readiness units staffed with contract soldiers, the quality of reinforcements is likely to be much lower than the units first committed to the invasion.*

The Russian military is a hybrid format combining a traditional cadre-and-reserve conscript system and a contract-professional system. While the Russian Army has made efforts to professionalize its ranks, particularly in the last 15 years, it remains reliant on conscripts, both for its active-duty force and for its reserve forces in the event of general mobilization.<sup>[1]</sup> Most combat units must be filled out by conscripts or mobilized reservists in order to be combat-capable. Contract soldiers are concentrated in the cadre and elite units, especially the airborne units.

The cadre-and-reserve units of the Russian Armed Forces are maintained at a low readiness with a limited number of professional staff and conscripts, with the expectation that they would be staffed with reservists in the event of mobilization.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russians have already used many cadre-and-reserve units in Ukraine, and they have not performed well against the Ukrainians, with some units suffering heavy losses. Russia does not likely have a large reserve of highly skilled contract units remaining, although there are probably some uncommitted forces.

### **Ukraine Conflict Update 15**

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

Key Takeaways March 4

- Russian forces have advanced rapidly on the eastern outskirts of Kyiv, likely from the Sumy axis, and may attempt to encircle and/or attack the capital on the east bank of the Dnipro in the coming 24-48 hours.
- Russian troops did not press a ground offensive against Kharkiv in the last 24 hours but have instead diverted forces to the west and southeast, likely supporting efforts against Kyiv and in and around Donbas respectively.
- Russian troops have surrounded Mariupol and are attacking it brutally to destroy it or compel its capitulation.
- Russian forces have renewed their ground advance on Mykolaiv, having secured Kherson city, likely to set conditions for a further attack toward Odesa. Russian naval infantry are likely poised to conduct amphibious landings near Odesa when Russian forces have secured or are close to securing a reliable ground route from Crimea to Odesa.
- The Kremlin dramatically limited Russia's already isolated domestic information environment and criminalized unfavorable coverage of the war in Ukraine on March 4, setting conditions to improve the domestic efficacy of its information operations.
- Ukraine is attempting to increase the flow of information about Russia's invasion of Ukraine to Russian citizens to increase domestic Russian opposition to the war.
- The Kremlin set conditions to justify potential Russian conscriptions and more aggressive operations in Ukraine.

- The Russian Defense Ministry said foreign citizens fighting for Ukraine will not be considered legal combatants and will not be protected under international law.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko reiterated that Belarus will not enter the war in Ukraine but has likely already committed Belarusian troops.
- NATO rejected Ukraine's request to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine.
- Russia has not yet followed through on its agreement with Ukraine to establish the humanitarian corridors that would enable civilian supply and evacuation.
- The US Department of Defense established a deconfliction line with its Russian counterpart to prevent accidental escalation near the Ukrainian and Belarusian borders.
- Finland and Sweden continued high-level discussions on NATO membership and multilateral defense measures.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 4**

**[Click here to read the full update.](#)**

Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 4, 3:00 pm EST

Russian forces continue their focus on encircling Kyiv. The western envelopment remains bogged down but Russian troops have moved more rapidly from the east and are arriving in the capital's outskirts on the Sumy axis. The speed of the advance from the east is likely to slow as Russian forces leave sparsely-inhabited and flat terrain and enter the more congested and built-up eastern suburbs. Russian mechanized forces around Kharkiv appear to be supporting operations toward the east and west of the city, likely weakening their ability to encircle or seize it.

The Russian military has concentrated considerable combat power around Mariupol to encircle and ultimately seize or destroy it. The purpose of this effort is not entirely clear. The capture or destruction of Mariupol will not likely materially affect the outcome of the war, whose decisive operations are more than 600 kilometers northwest around Kyiv. Russian forces have also renewed their ground offensive west from Crimea toward Odesa, currently focusing on advancing from Kherson to Mykolaiv, and seized the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant north of Crimea. The continued pursuit of objectives along three diverging axes by the same group of forces in Crimea has hindered the Russian military's ability to generate decisive effects on any of the three.

#### **Ukraine Conflict Update 14**

**[Click here to read the full update.](#)**

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

Key Takeaways March 3

- Russian forces opened a new line of advance from Belarus south toward Zhytomyr Oblast, west of Kyiv, as Russian forces attempting to encircle Kyiv from the northwest were driven further west by determined Ukrainian resistance and counterattacks. Russian forces will struggle to complete an encirclement of Kyiv at all if they have to advance along ring roads as far from the city center as those they are now using.
- Russian forces on the east bank of the Dnipro River remain unable to secure the important town of Chernihiv or to break through Ukrainian defenses in the northeastern outskirts of Kyiv.
- Russian ground forces have remained relatively static near Kharkiv as Russian artillery, air, and missile bombardments wreak devastation in the city, though the Ukrainian military indicates that a regiment-sized Russian formation will try to envelop or bypass Kharkiv in the coming days.
- Russian forces are attempting once again to open a line of advance through northern Luhansk Oblast, possibly to assist efforts at Kharkiv or, as the Ukrainian General Staff assesses, to drive on Dnipro and Zapozhytsya. The Russian forces currently reported as engaging in that drive are far too small to attack either city successfully and are probably insufficient to sustain a long drive on their own.

- Russian troops have surrounded Mariupol and are attacking it brutally to compel its capitulation or destroy it.
- The mayor of Kherson conditionally surrendered to the Russians, allowing Russian forces to renew their advance on Mykolayiv. The Ukrainian military nevertheless reportedly defeated an attempted Russian air assault to take an airfield near Mykolayiv.
- The Kremlin escalated domestic censorship of Ukraine coverage and accused Western platforms of launching disinformation campaigns.
- Sweden and Finland are increasing cooperation with each other and NATO and may consider NATO membership due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Georgia and Moldova officially applied to join the European Union.
- Western intelligence sources reported that Chinese President Xi Jinping had prior knowledge of the Russian invasion and asked Russia to delay operations until after the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 3

**Click here to read the full update.**

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 3, 4:00 pm EST

The Russian military has continued its unsuccessful attempts to encircle Kyiv and capture Kharkiv. The Russians continued to attack piecemeal, committing a few battalion tactical groups at a time rather than concentrating overwhelming force to achieve decisive effects. Russian commanders appear to prefer opening up new lines of advance for regiment-sized operations but have been unable to achieve meaningful synergies between efforts along different axes toward the same objectives. They have also continued conducting operations in southern Ukraine along three diverging axes rather than concentrating on one or attempting mutually supporting efforts. These failures of basic operational art—long a strong suit of the Soviet military and heavily studied at Russian military academies—remain inexplicable as does the Russian military's failure to gain air superiority or at least to ground the Ukrainian Air Force. The Russian conventional military continues to underperform badly, although it may still wear down and defeat the conventional Ukrainian military by sheer force of numbers and brutality. Initial indications that Russia is mobilizing reinforcements from as far away as the Pacific Ocean are concerning in this respect. Those indications also suggest, however, that the Russian General Staff has concluded that the forces it initially concentrated for the invasion of Ukraine will be insufficient to achieve Moscow's military objectives.

Operations to envelop Kyiv remain Russia's main effort. Russian troops are also continuing three supporting efforts, one to seize Kharkiv, one to take Mariupol and secure the "land bridge" connecting Rostov-on-Don to Crimea, and one to secure Kherson and set conditions for a drive west toward Mykolayiv and Odesa.

The Russian attack on Kyiv likely consists of a main effort aimed at enveloping and ultimately encircling the city from the west and a supporting effort along the axes from Chernihiv and Sumy to encircle it from the east.

Russian forces in the south resumed offensive operations toward Mykolayiv on March 3 after securing Kherson on March 2, but do not appear to pose an imminent danger to Odesa. Russian forces likely seek to force Mariupol to capitulate by destroying critical civilian infrastructure and killing civilians to create a humanitarian catastrophe—an approach Russian forces have repeatedly taken in Syria.[1]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces opened a new line of advance from Belarus south toward Zhytomyr Oblast, west of Kyiv, as Russian forces attempting to encircle Kyiv from the northwest were driven further west by determined Ukrainian resistance and counterattacks. Russian forces will struggle to complete an encirclement of Kyiv at all if they have to advance along ring roads as far from the city center as those they are now using.
- Russian forces on the east bank of the Dnipro River remain unable to secure the important town of Chernihiv or to break through Ukrainian defenses in the northeastern outskirts of Kyiv.

- Russian ground forces have remained relatively static near Kharkiv as Russian artillery, air, and missile bombardments wreak devastation in the city. The Ukrainian military indicates that a regiment-sized Russian formation will try to envelop or bypass Kharkiv in the coming days. Similar Russian attempts at such operations elsewhere in Ukraine render the success of such an undertaking at that scale unlikely.
- Russian forces are attempting once again to open a line of advance through northern Luhansk Oblast, possibly to assist efforts at Kharkiv or, as the Ukrainian General Staff assesses, to drive on Dnipro and Zapozhyia. The Russian forces currently reported as engaging in that drive are far too small to attack either city successfully and are probably insufficient to sustain a long drive on their own.
- Russian troops have surrounded Mariupol and are attacking it brutally to compel its capitulation or destroy it.
- The mayor of Kherson conditionally surrendered to the Russians, allowing Russian forces to renew their advance on Mykolayiv, which they have done. The Ukrainian military nevertheless reportedly defeated an attempted Russian air assault to take an airfield near Mykolayiv.

### **Ukraine Conflict Update 13**

**[Click here to read the full update.](#)**

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

With The Critical Threats Project, AEI

#### **Key Takeaways March 2, 2022**

- Russian forces resumed offensive operations against Kyiv's western outskirts on March 2 after pausing for resupply from February 27 to March 1 but failed to secure any additional territory.
- Russian forces launched offensive operations in Zhytomyr Oblast, expanding their envelopment of Kyiv further west than ISW previously assessed—likely to outflank stronger-than-anticipated Ukrainian resistance and limited Ukrainian counterattacks in Kyiv's outskirts.
- Russian forces renewed advances toward northeastern Kyiv on March 2, reaching a line approximately 65km from the city center on that axis.
- Russian forces assaulted central Kharkiv and continued to heavily bombard the city on March 2, likely increasing civilian casualties.
- Russian forces fully encircled Mariupol as of March 2 and are conducting a deliberate campaign to destroy critical civilian infrastructure and residential areas in a likely attempt to force the city to surrender.
- Russian forces continued to reduce pockets of Ukrainian resistance in Kherson on March 2 and will likely secure the city in the next 24 hours if they have not done so already.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense released implausibly low Russian fatality counts for the first time on March 2, preparing the Russian population for the arrival of injured and killed service members back to Russia.
- The Kremlin made inconsistent statements regarding negotiations with Ukraine but agreed to a second round of talks scheduled for March 3.
- The Kremlin continued trying to control the domestic and international narrative around the invasion by restricting Russian citizens' freedom of speech and access to information while framing Ukraine and the West as aggressors.
- The Kremlin continued to struggle with Western sanctions while it set conditions for longer-term domestic capabilities.
- Ukrainian defense officials claimed Ukrainian forces thwarted an assassination attempt targeting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky after a tip from anti-war Russian intelligence officers on March 1.
- Western states announced additional sanctions targeting Russia and Belarus while more private companies suspended operations in Russia.
- NATO and EU countries continued delivering lethal military aid to Ukraine on March 2.
- International organizations and Western leaders are increasingly concerned about Russia's indiscriminate targeting of civilians and use of banned weapons as civilian casualties rise.
- The UN General Assembly voted on March 2 overwhelmingly in favor of a motion demanding Russia stop military operations in Ukraine; China and India abstained.

- Record-setting refugee flows began to strain the support structures in states neighboring Ukraine on March 2.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Ukrainian officials urged caution as Russian forces advanced toward another Ukrainian nuclear power plant on March 1 and 2.
- Global oil and gas prices continued to skyrocket despite Western efforts to avoid sanctioning Russia's energy sector.

### [Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 2](#)

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

With The Critical Threats Project, AEI

#### Key Takeaways March 2, 2022

- Russian forces resumed offensive operations against Kyiv's western outskirts on March 2 after pausing for resupply February 27-March 1 but failed to secure any additional territory.
- Russian forces launched offensive operations in Zhytomyr Oblast, expanding their envelopment of Kyiv further west than ISW previously assessed—likely to outflank stronger-than-anticipated Ukrainian resistance and limited Ukrainian counterattacks in Kyiv's outskirts.
- Russian forces renewed advances towards northeastern Kyiv on March 2, reaching a line approximately 65km from the city center on that axis.
- Russian forces assaulted central Kharkiv and continued to heavily bombard the city on March 2.
- Russian forces fully encircled Mariupol as of March 2 and are conducting a deliberate campaign to destroy critical civilian infrastructure and residential areas in a likely attempt to force the city to surrender.
- Russian forces continued to reduce pockets of Ukrainian resistance in Kherson on March 2 and will likely secure the city in the next 24 hours if they have not done so already.

### [Ukraine Conflict Update 12](#)

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

With The Critical Threats Project, AEI

#### Key Takeaways March 1, 2022

- [CORRECTION] Russian President Vladimir Putin likely moved Russia's nuclear alert status to their highest peacetime level on February 27, the second of four possible levels.
- The Kremlin admitted Russian casualties in Ukraine for the first time but announced an implausibly low number of killed or wounded.
- Ukraine combatted Russian information campaigns while the Kremlin continued censoring information in Russia.
- Anti-war protests in Russia continued on March 1 despite mass arrests and government censorship.
- European Union (EU) countries are set to expand SWIFT sanctions as more private companies suspend operations and services in Russia.
- NATO and EU countries continued providing military aid but reneged on promised fighter jets for Ukraine on March 1.
- Private companies and Western governments sanctioned Russian state-affiliated media to combat Russian disinformation and propaganda on March 1.
- European and Ukrainian leaders advanced efforts to quickly admit Ukraine to the EU on March 1.
- Russian forces are setting conditions to envelop Kyiv from the west and attempting to open a new axis of attack from the east that would let them encircle the capital. It is

- unclear if Russia has sufficient combat power to complete such an encirclement and hold it against Ukrainian counter-attacks.
- Russian forces will likely launch a renewed ground offensive to seize Kharkiv following the air/artillery/missile attack it has been conducting in the past 24 hours.
  - Russian and Russian proxy forces will likely solidify the “land bridge” linking Rostov-on-Don with Crimea, allowing Russian forces to move more rapidly from Rostov to reinforce efforts further west.
  - Russia’s successful seizure of Kherson city may allow Russian forces to resume their interrupted drive toward Mykolaiv and Odesa.
  - Belarusian forces have likely entered the war on Russia’s side despite denials by the Belarusian president.

**Key Events February 28, 4:00 pm EST – March 1, 4:00 pm EST**

**Military Events:**

**Russian forces are completing the reinforcement and resupply of their troops north and west of Kyiv and launching an envelopment of the capital likely aimed at encircling and ultimately capturing it. This effort will likely accelerate in the next 24-48 hours.** Russian operations against Kyiv are Moscow’s main effort. Russian troops are also undertaking three supporting efforts, one to seize Kharkiv, one to take Mariupol and secure the “land bridge” connecting Rostov-on-Don to Crimea, and one to secure Kherson and set conditions for a drive west toward Mykolaiv and Odesa. The three supporting operations are active, with the operation against Mariupol making the most progress in the last 24 hours.

**Russian troops claim to have encircled Mariupol and have reportedly entered the city of Kherson in the south.** Russian forces are receiving needed supplies and reinforcements that may facilitate much more rapid and effective operations in the coming 24-72 hours. The Russian effort around Kyiv remains poorly organized, however, with elements of many different battalions combined into what seem to be ad hoc groupings rather than operating under standing regiment or brigade headquarters. The initial errors in the Russian force composition and organization in Belarus and western Russia that ISW has previously reported on, which contributed to Russian logistical and operational failures around Kyiv, will be difficult to remedy quickly and will likely continue to cause friction and reduce the effectiveness of Russian operations even as supply issues are addressed and reinforcements come into the fight. It remains too early to evaluate the likely effective combat power the added Russian troops will bring.

### **Ukraine Conflict Update 11**

[\*\*Click here to read the full update.\*\*](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

**Key Takeaways February 28**

- Russian forces increasingly targeted Ukrainian airfields and logistics centers on February 28, particularly in western Ukraine. Russia likely seeks to ground the Ukrainian air force and interdict the ability of Western states to resupply the Ukrainian military.
- Russia deployed additional heavy forces and artillery that it has so far failed to employ in assaults on Kyiv to the city’s western approach on February 27-28. Russian forces will likely launch a renewed assault on western Kyiv on March 1.
- The Kremlin largely froze trade in foreign currencies and raised interest rates to halt the Ruble’s freefall on February 28 due to the imposition of Western sanctions. The ruble fell over 30 percent against the dollar on February 28.
- The United States and its European allies levied further sanctions targeting the Russian Central Bank, throttling Russia’s ability to prop up the ruble. Tax havens Switzerland and Monaco joined European Union (EU) sanctions, contravening the Swiss tradition of neutrality.
- NATO and EU countries prepared potential sanctions targeting Belarus following a sham constitutional referendum and intelligence suggesting Belarus could join the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- The first round of Russian-Ukrainian negotiations in Gomel, Belarus, failed to yield any agreement.
- EU and Ukrainian leaders strengthened their push for quick Ukrainian admittance to the European Union.
- NATO and the EU announced more financial and military equipment support to Ukraine, including an EU package amounting to over 500 million euros of military aid.

- Russian shelling of civilian areas in eastern Ukraine and worsening food shortages across the country will likely exacerbate the refugee crisis across Ukraine and into Eastern Europe.
- Russian forces began using heavy artillery against central Kharkiv on February 28, indicating a dangerous inflection in Russian operations as the Kremlin chooses to use air and artillery assets it previously held in reserve.
- Russian forces resumed limited advances in northeastern Ukraine on February 28 after an operational pause on February 26-27.
- Russian and proxy forces resumed assaults on Ukrainian forces defending Mariupol from the east and deployed additional artillery and anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) assets to the Mariupol front line on February 28.
- Russian and Belarusian forces may be preparing for an additional line of advance from Belarus into western Ukraine.
- Russian successes in southern Ukraine are the most dangerous and threaten to unhinge Ukraine's successful defenses and rearguard actions to the north and northeast.
- Russian troops are facing growing morale and logistics issues, predictable consequences of the poor planning, coordination, and execution of attacks along Ukraine's northern border.
- Russian officials downplayed Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 27 decision to place Russian nuclear and missile forces on their highest combat readiness orders. The United States declined to change its own alert levels.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 28, 2022**

**[Click here to read the full update.](#)**

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

The Russian military is reorganizing its military efforts in an attempt to remedy poor planning and execution based on erroneous assumptions about Ukrainians' will and ability to resist. Russian operations around Kyiv remain limited as logistics and reinforcements arrive but will likely resume in greater strength in the next 24 hours. Ukrainian military leaders say that they have used the pause to strengthen Kyiv's defenses and prepare to defend their capital in depth. The Ukrainian military likely cannot prevent Russian forces from enveloping or encircling Kyiv if the Russians send enough combat power to do so, but likely can make Russian efforts to gain control of the city itself extremely costly and possibly unsuccessful.

### **Ukraine Conflict Update 10**

**[Click here to read the full update.](#)**

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

**Key Takeaways February 27**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin put Russia's nuclear and strategic missile forces, described as "deterrence forces," on their highest alert status in response to "aggressive statements in the West" on February 27.
- Russian forces likely conducted an operational pause on the Kyiv axis on February 26-27 to deploy additional supplies and forces forward. Russian forces will likely resume offensive operations against Kyiv in the next 24 hours.
- Russian forces largely conducted an operational pause on their current broad front of advance between Chernihiv and Kharkiv. Ukrainian forces continue to delay and inflict losses on the Russian advance but will likely not be able to halt further advances if the Kremlin commits additional reserves.
- Russian forces entered the city of Kharkiv for the first time on February 27 but remain unlikely to take the city without the use of heavier firepower.
- Russian forces have encircled Mariupol from the west and began initial assaults on the city. Russian forces have not made any major territorial gains from the east in Donbas after four days of fighting. Russian forces likely intend to pin Ukrainian forces in place on the line of contact to enable Russian forces breaking out of Crimea to isolate them.
- Russian forces continued to advance north from Crimea towards Zaporozhia and, in conjunction with Russian advances on Mariupol, threaten to isolate Ukrainian forces on the line of contact in Donbas if they do not withdraw.

- Russian forces failed to seize Kherson after Ukrainian counterattacks reclaimed it on February 26. An unknown concentration of Russian forces remains on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River and threatens Mikolayiv, however.
- Russian successes in southern Ukraine are the most dangerous and threaten to unhinge Ukraine's successful defenses and rearguard actions to the north and northeast.
- The Belarusian government is setting information and legal conditions to justify a Belarusian offensive against Ukraine and the imminent deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus as of February 27.
- US and allied sanctions against Russian banking will likely crush Russian foreign currency reserves, depleting the value of the ruble and risking Russian hyperinflation.
- The European Union announced direct military aid to Ukraine for the first time in EU history on February 27.
- Germany announced a dramatic reorientation of its foreign policy to mitigate the threat that Russia poses to Germany and its allies. Germany will prioritize military spending and energy independence despite short-term economic costs.

## Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 27

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

The Russian military has likely recognized that its initial expectations that limited Russian attacks would cause the collapse of Ukrainian resistance have failed and is recalibrating accordingly. The Russian military is moving additional combat resources toward Ukraine and establishing more reliable and effective logistics arrangements to support what is likely a larger, harder, and more protracted conflict than it had originally prepared for. The tide of the war could change rapidly in Russia's favor if the Russian military has correctly identified its failings and addresses them promptly, given the overwhelming advantage in net combat power Moscow enjoys. Ukrainian morale and combat effectiveness remain extremely high, however, and Russian forces confront the challenge of likely intense urban warfare in the coming days.

**Russian forces largely conducted an operational pause on February 26-27 but will likely resume offensive operations and begin using greater air and artillery support in the coming days.** Russian airborne and special forces troops are engaged in urban warfare in northwestern Kyiv, but Russian mechanized forces are not yet in the capital. Russian forces conducted limited attacks on the direct approaches to Kyiv on both banks of the Dnipro River, but largely paused offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine. Russian forces likely paused to recalibrate their – to date largely unsuccessful – approach to offensive operations in northern Ukraine and deploy additional reinforcements and air assets to the front lines.

Russian forces from Crimea slowly pushed north toward Zaporizhie and the southeastern bend of the Dnipro River and east along the Azov Sea coast toward Mariupol on February 27. Russian forces advancing east from Crimea began initial assaults against Mariupol the morning of February 27. These advances risk cutting off the large concentrations of Ukrainian forces still defending the former line of contact between unoccupied Ukraine and occupied Donbas.

Ukrainian resistance remains remarkably effective and Russian operations especially on the Kyiv axis have been poorly coordinated and executed, leading to significant Russian failures on that axis and at Kharkiv. Russian forces remain much larger and more capable than Ukraine's conventional military, however, and Russian advances in southern Ukraine may threaten to unhinge the defense of Kyiv and northeastern Ukraine if they continue unchecked.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces likely conducted an operational pause on the Kyiv axis on February 26-27 to deploy additional supplies and forces forward. Russian forces will likely resume offensive operations against Kyiv in the next 24 hours. Russian troops have not yet committed heavy armor and artillery forces to fighting in Kyiv and will likely need to do so to take the city.
- Russian forces largely conducted an operational pause on their current broad front of advance between Chernihiv and Kharkiv. Ukrainian forces continue to delay and inflict

- losses on the Russian advance but will likely not be able to halt further advances if the Kremlin commits additional reserves.
- Russian forces entered the city of Kharkiv for the first time on February 27 but remain unlikely to take the city without the use of heavier firepower.
  - Russian forces have encircled Mariupol from the west and began initial assaults on the city. Russian forces have not made any major territorial gains from the east in Donbas after four days of fighting. Russian forces likely intend to pin Ukrainian forces in place on the line of contact to enable Russian forces breaking out of Crimea to isolate them.
  - Russian forces continued to advance north towards Zaporizhia and, in conjunction with Russian advances on Mariupol, threaten to isolate Ukrainian forces on the line of contact in Donbas if they do not withdraw.
  - Russian forces failed to seize Kherson after Ukrainian counterattacks reclaimed it on February 26. An unknown concentration of Russian forces remains on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River and threatens Mikolayiv, however.
  - Russian successes in southern Ukraine are the most dangerous and threaten to unhinge Ukraine's successful defenses and rearguard actions to the north and northeast.
  - Russian troops are facing growing morale and logistics issues, predictable consequences of the poor planning, coordination, and execution of attacks along Ukraine's northern border.
  - Russian air and missile strikes targeted a Ukrainian airbase in western Ukraine to ground the remaining Ukrainian air force the night of February 26-27. The Ukrainian General Staff reported Russian forces conducted 5 air and 16 missile strikes across Ukraine from midnight to 1pm local time, February 27.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian strikes targeted the Ivano-Frankivsk airfield, home to Ukraine's 114th Tactical Aviation Brigade.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces continue to refrain from using the full array of air and missile capabilities available to them. Russian forces will likely increase their use of fires in coming days to overcome heavier-than-anticipated Ukrainian resistance, however.
  - Russian forces in northeast Ukraine continue to face morale and supply issues, likely due to poor planning and ad hoc command structures, as ISW previously forecasted.<sup>[3]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff additionally reported Russian forces are "experiencing an acute shortage of fuel and food" and are increasingly using Belarusian rail networks to supply Russian forces in Ukraine.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **Ukraine Conflict Update 9**

[\*\*Click here to read the full update.\*\*](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

February 26, 9:00 pm EST

### **Key Takeaways February 26**

- Russia has failed to encircle and isolate Kyiv with mechanized and airborne attacks as it had clearly planned to do. Russian forces are now engaging in more straightforward mechanized drives into Kyiv along a narrow front on the west bank of the Dnipro River and on a broad front to the northeast.
- Russian forces temporarily abandoned efforts to seize Chernihiv and Kharkiv to the northeast and east of Kyiv and are bypassing those cities to continue their drive on Kyiv. Failed Russian attacks against both cities were poorly designed and executed and encountered more determined and effective resistance than Russia likely expected.
- Russian successes in southern Ukraine are the most dangerous and threaten to unhinge Ukraine's successful defenses and rearguard actions to the north and northeast.
- Russian forces in eastern Ukraine remain focused on pinning the large concentration of Ukrainian forces arrayed along the former line of contact in the east, likely to prevent them from interfering with Russian drives on Kyiv and to facilitate their encirclement and destruction.
- Ukrainian forces retook the critical city of Kherson and Russian forces halted their drive on Odesa. Some Russian troops remain west of the Dnipro River and are advancing on Mykolaiv, but the main axes of advance have shifted to the north and east toward Zaporizhie and Mariupol respectively.
- Russian forces have taken the critical city of Berdyansk from the west, threatening to encircle Mariupol with Russian forces in Donbas attacking Mariupol from the east, likely to pin defenders in the city.
- Russian troops are facing growing morale and logistics issues, predictable consequences of the poor planning, coordination, and execution of attacks along

Ukraine's northern border.

- The United States, Canada, and European allies removed select Russian banks from the SWIFT global financial network and agreed to additional measures that could significantly increase economic pressure on Russia.
- The United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom facilitated a significant expansion of NATO countries' lethal aid shipments to Ukraine since the Russian invasion began.
- NATO countries began contributing forces to NATO Response Force (NRF) operations in Eastern Europe, reinforcing NATO's eastern flank.
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine is set to displace millions of Ukrainians internally and throughout eastern Europe; at least 150,000 Ukrainians have fled the country as of February 26 as urban fighting intensifies.
- Kremlin censors increased crackdowns on independent media amid growing Russian opposition to the war.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment: February 26, 2022

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

February 26, 3:00 pm EST

**Russian forces' main axes of advance in the last 24 hours focused on Kyiv, northeastern Ukraine, and southern Ukraine.** Russian airborne and special forces troops are engaged in urban warfare in northwestern Kyiv, but Russian mechanized forces are not yet in the capital. Russian forces from Crimea have changed their primary axes of advance from a presumed drive toward Odesa to focus on pushing north toward Zaporizhie and the southeastern bend of the Dnipro River and east along the Azov Sea coast toward Mariupol. These advances risk cutting off the large concentrations of Ukrainian forces still defending the former line of contact between unoccupied Ukraine and occupied Donbas. **Ukrainian leaders may soon face the painful decision of ordering the withdrawal of those forces and the ceding of more of eastern Ukraine or allowing much of Ukraine's uncommitted conventional combat power to be encircled and destroyed.** There are no indications as yet of whether the Ukrainian government is considering this decision point.

Ukrainian resistance remains remarkably effective and Russian operations especially on the Kyiv axis have been poorly coordinated and executed, leading to significant Russian failures on that axis and at Kharkiv. Russian forces remain much larger and more capable than Ukraine's conventional military, however, and Russian advances in southern Ukraine may threaten to unhinge the defense of Kyiv and northeastern Ukraine if they continue unchecked.

### Key Takeaways:

- Russia has failed to encircle and isolate Kyiv with the combination of mechanized and airborne attacks as it had clearly planned to do. Russian forces are now engaging in more straightforward mechanized drives into the capital along a narrow front along the west bank of the Dnipro River and toward Kyiv from a broad front to the northeast.
- Russian forces have temporarily abandoned failed efforts to seize Chernihiv and Kharkiv to the northeast and east of Kyiv and are bypassing those cities to continue their drive on Kyiv. Russian attacks against both cities appear to have been poorly designed and executed and to have encountered more determined and effective Ukrainian resistance than they expected.
- Russian movements in eastern Ukraine remain primarily focused on pinning the large concentration of Ukrainian conventional forces arrayed along the former line of contact in the east, likely to prevent them from interfering with Russian drives on Kyiv and to facilitate their encirclement and destruction.
- Russian forces coming north from Crimea halted their drive westward toward Odesa, and Ukrainian forces have retaken the critical city of Kherson. Some Russian troops remain west of the Dnipro River and are advancing on Mikolayiv, but the main axes of advance have shifted to the north and east toward Zaporizhie and Mariupol respectively.
- Russian forces have taken the critical city of Berdyansk from the west, threatening to encircle Mariupol even as Russian forces based in occupied Donbas attack Mariupol from the east, likely to pin defenders in the city as they are encircled.

- Russian successes in southern Ukraine are the most dangerous and threaten to unhinge Ukraine's successful defenses and rearguard actions to the north and northeast.
- Russian troops are facing growing morale and logistics issues, predictable consequences of the poor planning, coordination, and execution of attacks along Ukraine's northern border.

## Ukraine Conflict Update 8

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

February 25, 9:00 pm EST

Kremlin officials and Russian government media advanced the dual narratives that Ukrainian “nationalists” are the only Ukrainians fighting and that Russian forces are easily succeeding in Ukraine throughout coverage on February 25 to counteract the growing unpopularity of the war in Russia. TASS falsely claimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) forces are advancing toward the administrative borders of Donetsk Oblast and Luhansk Oblast late on February 25.[1] Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova falsely claimed Russian forces are only striking Ukrainian military infrastructure, not Ukrainian cities or civilians. Zakharova also claimed that Ukrainian “nationalists” threaten ethnic Russians with “direct reprisals” in Ukraine.[2] Russian domestic media additionally amplified a Russian Defense Ministry announcement claiming Ukrainian nationalist battalions are destroying bridges and civilian infrastructure to prevent other Ukrainians from surrendering.[3] Russian TV channels reported that the West and Ukraine are artificially insinuating panic across all Ukrainian cities to amplify mobilization and mass nationalist revolts by supplying Ukrainian civilians with weapons.[4] Russian Defense Ministry Spokesperson Major General Igor Konashenkov claimed that Russian forces neutralized 11 Ukrainian military aircraft, 18 tanks and armored vehicles, and 211 military infrastructure facilities but did not mention Russian losses. [5] Konashenkov also claimed that Russia’s seizure of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant prevented “Ukrainian nationalists” from using the power plant to conduct a “nuclear provocation.”[6] Kremlin media amplified false Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) claims that the Ukrainian 36th and 53rd Brigades “laid down their arms.”[7]

### Key Takeaways February 25

- Russian forces entered major Ukrainian cities—including Kyiv and Kherson —for the first time and carried out additional air and missile strikes on military and civilian targets.
- Russian forces entered the outskirts of Kyiv on the west bank of the Dnipro River as Russian sabotage groups in civilian clothing reportedly moved into downtown Kyiv.
- Ukrainian forces have successfully slowed Russian troops on the east bank of the Dnipro, forcing them to bypass the city of Chernihiv after stout resistance. Russian airborne forces have concentrated in southeastern Belarus, likely for use along the Chernihiv-bypass axis toward Kyiv in the next 24 hours.
- Russian forces will likely envelop Kharkiv in the next 24 hours after failing to enter the city through frontal assaults on February 24-25.
- Russian forces have achieved little success through frontal assaults or envelopments against Ukrainian forces in Donbas but may not have intended to do more than pin Ukrainian forces in the east.
- North of Crimea, Russian forces fully captured Kherson and are likely on the verge of seizing Melitopol in the east. Unconfirmed reports indicate that Russian forces bypassed Kherson earlier and headed directly for Mykolaiv and Odessa.
- Russian forces may be assembling in Stolin, Belarus, to open a new line of advance against Rivne in western Ukraine.
- Western intelligence officials told CNN on February 25 that Russian President Vladimir Putin intends to invade all of Ukraine and could install a pro-Kremlin regime within days.
- Russian opposition groups and citizens opposing the Russian war in Ukraine may be laying the foundations of a coordinated anti-war movement that will be unlikely to alter Putin’s decision making but will likely provoke harsher domestic crackdowns, further eroding Putin’s domestic popularity.
- The United States, United Kingdom, and European Union expanded their sanctions on Russia to target Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on February 25, but sanctions to sever Russia from SWIFT remain unlikely.

- NATO activated its 40,000-troop Response Force for the first time ever on February 25 to reinforce NATO's eastern flank in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- The International Criminal Court (ICC) announced possible investigations into alleged Russian war crimes amid Russian denials.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment: February 25, 2022

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

February 25, 3:00 pm EST

**Russian forces entered major Ukrainian cities—including Kyiv and Kherson—for the first time on February 25.** Russian forces' main axes of advance focused on Kyiv (successfully isolating the city on both banks of the Dnipro River). Russian military operations along Ukraine's northern border have been less well-planned, organized, and conducted than those emanating from Crimea. They have also been less successful so far. The divergence in performance likely arises in part from differences in the composition and organization of the Russian ground forces elements in the Western Military District and Belarus (to Ukraine's north) and Southern Military District and Black Sea Fleet (to its south and east), as ISW has previously observed.<sup>[1]</sup> Determined and well-organized Ukrainian resistance around Kyiv and Kharkiv has also played an important role in preventing the Russian military from advancing with the speed and success for which it had reportedly planned.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian military has deployed additional forces to southeastern Belarus, likely beyond those Moscow had planned to use against Ukraine, to offset these problems and challenges. Russian forces remain much larger and more capable than Ukraine's conventional military, however. Russia will likely defeat Ukrainian regular military forces and secure their territorial objectives at some point in the coming days or weeks if Putin is determined to do so and willing to pay the cost in blood and treasure.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces entered the outskirts of Kyiv on the west bank of the Dnipro on February 25. Russian sabotage groups in civilian clothes are reportedly active in downtown Kyiv.
- Russian forces have so far failed to enter Kyiv's eastern outskirts. Ukrainian forces have successfully slowed Russian troops, which have temporarily abandoned the failed attempt to take the city of Chernihiv and are instead bypassing it.
- Elements of the Russian 76th VDV (Airborne) division have concentrated in southeastern Belarus likely for use along the Chernihiv-bypass axis toward Kyiv in the next 24 hours.
- Russian forces will likely envelop Kharkiv in the next 24 hours after failing to enter the city through frontal assaults on February 24.
- Russian forces have achieved little success on frontal assaults or envelopments against Ukrainian forces in Donbas but may not have intended to do more than pin Ukrainian forces in the east.
- North of Crimea, Russian forces fully captured Kherson and are likely on the verge of seizing Melitopol in the east. Unconfirmed reports indicate that Russian forces had bypassed Kherson earlier and headed directly for Mykolaiv and Odessa.
- Russian forces may be assembling in Stolin, Belarus, to open a new line of advance against Rivne in western Ukraine.

## Ukraine Conflict Update 7

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team

February 24, 9:00 pm EST

### Key Takeaways February 24

- Ukrainian forces are successfully slowing Russian offensives on all axes of advance other than a Russian breakout from the Crimean Peninsula.

- Russian failure to ground the Ukrainian air force or cripple Ukrainian command and control is likely enabling these initial Ukrainian successes.
- Russian forces remain much larger and more capable than Ukraine's conventional military and Putin is likely to defeat Ukrainian regular military forces and secure his territorial objectives in the coming days or weeks if he is willing to pay the price.
- Ukrainian forces defeated a Russian operation to isolate Kyiv from the west, recapturing the Hostomel military airport from Russian VDV (Airborne) troops after several counterattacks throughout the day.
- Russian forces are rapidly advancing north from Crimea, securing Kherson city. Their deepest penetration to date is about 60 kilometers.
- Russian forces are advancing on Kyiv from Belarus on both sides of the Dnipro River, but have been temporarily halted east of the Dnipro at Chernihiv.
- Russian forces likely seek to cut off Ukrainian troops on the line of contact in Donbas using an envelopment behind the Ukrainian front lines through Luhansk Oblast. Russian frontal assaults have taken little territory in Donetsk and Luhansk at this time.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks to obfuscate to Russian citizens that he launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine aimed at regime change, likely to mitigate blowback from a Russian population unprepared for a major war.
- The United States and its European allies approved sweeping new sanctions against Russia's economic, military, technological, and energy sectors but attempted to mitigate the possible consequences of those sanctions for US and EU energy markets.
- US and NATO allies deployed additional forces to NATO's eastern flank to deter a spillover from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- International organizations warned of a looming humanitarian crisis as states bordering Ukraine deployed troops to their borders to prepare for a possible influx of Ukrainian refugees.
- The Kremlin detained hundreds of civilians across Russia for protesting the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Initial Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

February 24, 3:00 pm EST

Russian President Vladimir Putin began a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24 likely aimed at full regime change and the occupation of Ukraine. His claimed objective to "demilitarize" and "de-nazify" Ukraine is a transparent cover for an unprovoked war of aggression to occupy a neighboring state. Putin and Kremlin media continue to deny that the Russian invasion is a war, instead describing it as a special military operation. Putin's messaging is likely aimed at a domestic Russian audience, which the Kremlin has not fully prepared for the costs of a war against Ukraine. Russian officials and state media have been denying and mocking Western warnings of the impending Russian invasion for months and as recently as February 23. Russian forces remain much larger and more capable than Ukraine's conventional military. Russia will likely defeat Ukrainian regular military forces and secure their territorial objectives at some point in the coming days or weeks if Putin is determined to do so and willing to pay the cost in blood and treasure.

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces are successfully slowing Russian offensives on all axes of advance other than a Russian breakout from the Crimean Peninsula. Russian failure to ground the Ukrainian air force or cripple Ukrainian command and control is likely enabling these initial Ukrainian successes.
- Ukrainian forces are contesting the Hostomel military airport, 20 km northwest of Kyiv, as of 9:30 pm local time. Russian VDV (Airborne) troops landed at Hostomel and have also failed to capture the Boryspil airport southeast of Kyiv. Ukraine's contestation of the airport deprives Russian forces of any location to airlift forces onto Kyiv's western flank overnight.
- Russian forces are rapidly advancing north from Crimea, securing Kherson city. Their deepest penetration to date is about 60 kilometers.
- Russian forces are advancing on Kyiv from Belarus on both sides of the Dnipro River. Russian forces secured the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (on the west bank) at 7:30 pm local time, but

Ukrainian forces have slowed Russian advances east of the Dnipro at Chernihiv.

- Russian forces likely seek to cut off Ukrainian troops on the line of contact in Donbas using an envelopment behind the Ukrainian front lines through Luhansk Oblast. Russian frontal assaults have taken little territory in Donetsk and Luhansk at this time.

**Russian military operations began with a short and incomplete air campaign on February 24 around 4:00 am local time targeting Ukrainian air defenses, supply depots, and airfields across unoccupied Ukraine. However, portions of the Ukrainian Air Force remain operational and Ukrainian command and control appears intact.**

- US defense officials estimate initial strikes comprised over 100 missiles including a mix of short and medium-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and sea-launched missiles. An estimated 75 Russian bombers participated in the attack.
- Russia did not successfully ground the Ukrainian air force or cripple the Ukrainian armed forces, enabling several Ukrainian successes on February 24. ISW incorrectly forecasted that any Russian offensive would begin with a concentrated air and missile campaign to cripple Ukrainian command and control and infrastructure.
- The Russian failure to comprehensively strike key Ukrainian assets is a surprising break from expected Russian operations and has likely enabled stiffer Ukrainian defense. The Ukrainian military has shot down seven Russian aircraft and seven helicopters as of 8:00 pm local time, February 24.
- Russia has not demonstrated its full air and missile capabilities and will likely conduct further waves of strikes in the coming days aimed at degrading Ukraine's command and control and ability to redeploy forces.

## **Ukraine Conflict Update 6**

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

February 23, 2022 9:00 pm ET

*This report was produced immediately before Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the “special military operation” against Ukraine.*

Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely order Russian forces to deploy overtly into Russian proxy-controlled Ukrainian territory and to the line of contact with Ukrainian forces on February 24. Russia will likely invade unoccupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts shortly after that deployment. A Russian invasion of most of the rest of Ukraine could occur at the same time or shortly thereafter. The proxy leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) formally asked Putin to deploy Russian forces into DNR and LNR territory on February 23. The DNR and LNR leadership also requested Russian assistance to gain control over the rest of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, which they illegally claim as rightfully theirs. Putin secured unlimited parliamentary approval to deploy Russian forces abroad for any purpose he chooses on February 22. A Russian deployment to the DNR and LNR would set conditions for successive or simultaneous Russian military operations to conquer the entire Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and large areas of Ukrainian territory.

### **Key Takeaways February 23**

- The Russian proxy Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics formally asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to deploy Russian Armed Forces to Donbas, setting conditions for an immediate deployment of Russian ground forces at scale into Donbas and toward the line of contact.
- Satellite imagery and Western intelligence indicate an imminent full-scale invasion with additional Russian deployments to Belgorod near Kharkiv, northeastern Ukraine, and in Gomel, Belarus.
- Russian state TV implied that Ukraine does not have rights to sovereignty over most of its territory, setting information conditions for the Russian population to support a Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine.
- The United States forward-deployed additional forces to Europe to support NATO allies and deter Russian aggression.
- US and allied leaders canceled planned meetings with Russian officials due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

- The European Union (EU) and the United States are likely leveraging Russia's unprecedented aggression against Ukraine as a catalyst to transition the EU away from its current dependence on Russian natural gas.

## **Ukraine Conflict Update 5**

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

February 22, 4:00 pm ET

Russian President Vladimir Putin set information conditions for a military operation against Ukraine at a moment of his choosing on February 22. Russia will likely commence military operations to seize additional territory in eastern Ukraine within the coming days. ISW published its [assessment of Russia's likely immediate course of action](#) at 1:00 pm ET on February 22.

### **Key Takeaways February 22**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as covering the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (provinces) and secured unrestricted formal parliamentary authorization to deploy Russian forces abroad on February 22, setting conditions for a further offensive against Ukraine.
- The US and its European allies defined Putin's recognition of the DNR and LNR as an invasion of Ukraine and imposed a first round of sanctions.
- Ukraine called for further sanctions on Russia and Western military support, stressing its readiness to resist further Russian aggression.
- Russia's allies declined to immediately recognize the DNR and LNR and Russia faced widespread international condemnation.
- The Russian stock market and Rouble plummeted as the Kremlin sought to reassure Russia's population that Russia can weather Western sanctions.
- The US redeployed existing forces in Europe to support Eastern European allies.

## **Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Russia Likely to Pursue Phased Invasion of Unoccupied Ukrainian Territory**

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

February 22, 2022 1:30pm EST

Russian President Vladimir Putin set information conditions for a military operation against Ukraine at a moment of his choosing on February 22. Russia will likely commence military operations to seize additional territory in eastern Ukraine within the coming days.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) as covering the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (provinces) in a speech on February 22. Considerable parts of those oblasts remain in Ukrainian control with the heavily fortified "line of contact" running through both. Ukraine will not cede its portions of the oblasts voluntarily, so Putin will need to seize them militarily to make good on his recognition of the DNR's and LNR's claims to them. He might delay such military operations to attempt to coerce Ukraine into making these or other concessions with the threat of attack hanging over it, but his speech on February 22 significantly increased the likelihood of a Russian military operation into unoccupied eastern Ukraine.

## **Ukraine Conflict Update 4**

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

February 21, 2022 9:00pm EST

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.

## 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.

## Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Russian Military Operations in Southeastern

### Ukraine Imminent

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

*ISW launched this update to capture the key inflection point of Russia recognizing the DNR and LNR, which immediately preceded the overt deployment of Russian forces to those areas.*

February 21, 2022, 3:30pm EST

By Frederick W. Kagan and Mason Clark with George Barros and Kateryna Stepanenko

Russia recognized the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) and signed treaties of "friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance" with them on February 21, 2022.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his decision in a lengthy speech on the same day. The text of these agreements has not been publicized as of this writing.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian Duma will likely vote to authorize the use of Russian military force to occupy the republics, and Russian conventional forces will likely move to do so within the next 24-36 hours. Russian formal recognition of the republics will likely include recognizing all their territorial claims, which extend to the portions of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts still under Ukrainian control.

### Ukraine Conflict Update 3

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

February 20, 5:30pm EST

**Russia will likely attack Ukraine the week of February 21, 2022.** The Kremlin has deployed sufficient military forces and set informational conditions to conduct offensive operations including limited incursions into unoccupied Ukraine, a comprehensive air and missile campaign, and large-scale mechanized drives on Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities.

## Key Takeaways February 20

- Kremlin Spokesperson Peskov claimed Ukraine cannot and will not implement the Minsk II Accords, marking a significant change in Kremlin rhetoric that Russia could use as a pretext for further escalation.
- The Belarusian Defense Minister announced Russian troops deployed in Belarus will remain in the country after the conclusion of Russian-Belarusian exercises—enabling an indefinite Russian military presence in Belarus.
- Russia began testing its nuclear early warning system as part of ongoing exercises intended to deter any NATO response to Russian actions against Ukraine.
- French President Emmanuel Macron proposed a renewed ceasefire (unsuccessfully, as of publication) in Donbas in back-to-back phone calls with Putin and Zelensky.
- The Kremlin intensified its disinformation efforts to generate the false appearance of a Ukrainian genocide against Russians in Donbas through evacuation efforts and false claims of Ukrainian targeting of civilians.

- A CBS national security correspondent claimed the US has intelligence that Russian commanders already received direct orders to invade Ukraine, but no US official confirmed the claim.
- Turkish officials decried the further imposition of sanctions on Russia and refrained from condemning Russia's military buildup to retain its balancing relationship with the Kremlin.

## **Ukraine Conflict Update 2**

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

February 19, 7:00pm EST

**Russia will likely attack Ukraine before February 21, 2022, as we discuss [here](#).** The Kremlin has deployed sufficient military forces and set informational conditions to conduct offensive operations including limited incursions into unoccupied Ukraine, a comprehensive air and missile campaign, and large-scale mechanized drives on Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities.

### **Key Takeaways February 19**

- Russian and Belarusian forces carried out the final day of active tactical exercises as part of the Joint Russian-Belarusian “Union Resolve 2022” exercise, scheduled to end on February 20. Russian forces currently remain scattered across several Belarusian training grounds and will likely require until at least February 20 to concentrate in southern Belarus if Russia intends to leverage them in an attack on Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko oversaw Russia’s “GROM” nuclear triad exercises, currently being held earlier in the year than previous annual iterations—likely to deter any significant NATO response to possible Russian aggression against Ukraine.
- Chairman of the Russian State Duma (Parliament) Vyacheslav Volodin announced the Duma will hold a session on February 22 to discuss and respond to what the Kremlin is calling a forced mass exodus of Russian citizens from the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics (LNR and DNR).
- The Russian-backed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics began the general mobilization of military-age male citizens amid increasingly frantic claims (amplified by Kremlin media) of an impending Ukrainian offensive against Donbas, including the publication of a faked Ukrainian offensive plan.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky notably left Ukraine to attend the Munich Security Conference in person, and urged Western states to take imminent action against Russian escalations.
- US and NATO officials emphasized unity and collective defense among member states against Russian escalations at the Munich Security Conference in Germany but announced no new policies.
- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated Russia’s security concerns should be respected but urged all states to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty, marking a possible break in China’s previous full support for Russia in the current Ukraine crisis.

## **Ukraine Conflict Update 1**

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

February 18, 10:00pm EST

**Russia will likely attack Ukraine before February 21, 2022, as we discuss [here](#).** The Kremlin has deployed sufficient military forces and set informational conditions to conduct offensive operations including limited incursions into unoccupied Ukraine, a comprehensive air and missile campaign, and large-scale mechanized drives on Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities.

**ISW's Russia Team is launching a new product line, Ukraine Conflict Updates, in light of this forecast.** This daily synthetic product covering key events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine 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 will no longer be updated.

## **Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: New Indicators of Imminent Russian Attack**

[Click here to read the full update.](#)

*This update marked the beginning of ISW's crisis coverage on the conflict in Ukraine.*

By Fredrick W. Kagan and Mason Clark

February 18, 2022, 2:00 pm EST

Russia may launch an attack on Ukraine on Saturday, February 19, 2022. The attack would likely begin with an air and missile campaign targeting much of Ukraine to decapitate the government and degrade the Ukrainian military as well as the ability of Ukrainian citizens to prepare to resist a subsequent Russian invasion. US and allied governments have been warning of such an attack for some days, pointing to the size of the Russian forces concentrated on Ukraine's borders.<sup>[1]</sup> Western officials have additionally said that Russian troops have moved to jumping-off positions for an invasion over the past 24 hours.

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